

interzone

APRIL 2003

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GRIMWOOD**

**GEOFF
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**NIGEL BROWN
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interzone

science fiction & fantasy

APRIL 2003

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CONTENTS

Fiction

BIRTH DAYS <i>Geoff Ryman</i>	5
ANNUITY CLINIC <i>Nigel Brown</i>	11
PIER PRESSURE <i>Christina Lake</i>	18
FLIGHTS <i>Daniel Kaysen</i>	22
THE BRUTAL SHADOW <i>Matt Colborn</i>	36
BREAKFAST AT THE FIR TREE DINER <i>Jon Courtenay Grimwood</i>	43

Features

UNNIVERSARIES <i>Editorial by Paul Brazier</i>	4
FAIRIES AT THE BOTTOM OF MY CHANDELIER <i>Media reviews by Evelyn Lewes</i>	30
STILL TURNING MOTIFS UPSIDE DOWN <i>Judith Clute interviewed by Paul Brazier</i>	34
ANSIBLE LINK <i>News by David Langford</i>	37
WHO DIDN'T KILL HORROR? <i>Opinion by Gary Westfahl</i>	50
BOOK REVIEWS <i>Neil Jones, William Thompson, Nigel Brown, Paul Brazier and Paul Beardsley</i>	52

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When I started *SF Nexus*, I wanted to do something positive about the future of science fiction. Subsequently, when David Pringle and I decided to join forces, and *SF Nexus* was folded into *Interzone*, it might have been the end of my aspirations, so I am grateful for the occasional opportunity to guest edit and so keep my dream alive. At issue 177, I exceeded the number of issues that had been produced without me, and that made me think we ought to commemorate the merger in some way. It is, of course, not an anniversary, but little things like logic rarely govern the activities of human beings; for instance, around the same time, I saw some teenage drama where a girl was getting upset with her boyfriend because he hadn't remembered that it was, in her words, their "month's anniversary!" Anyone with any sensitivity to the roots of the language would cringe at this kind of nonsensical construction, but it did flag up to me that there is a basic craving in the human being for reasons to celebrate, to confirm that they are who they think they are, and that it is important. This gave me the idea of suggesting that people write around the theme of spurious anniversaries.

Well, as an idea, it wasn't a show-stopper, but it did prompt several of my favourite writers to submit work, and the results appear here. It is a solid pleasure to have another story from Geoff Ryman. Geoff has been in almost every magazine I have published. He was in all the issues of *SF Nexus*, and would have liked to have been in the Australian issue. I didn't think of him as having an Australian connection— he's Canadian/Californian, but his parents were both Geordies — but, he says, he had an Australian grandfather — and now he has a strong Brazilian connection, as evidenced in this story, it is plain he has inherited his familial wanderlust. Anyway, while he missed that one, he did submit a story for my previous guest-edited issue, but withdrew it as not up to his usual standard. This time, however, he has come up trumps.

Another old friend, Christina Lake also had a story in *Interzone* 88, and the story she gives us this time was actually submitted to me for the putative *SF Nexus* 5. At the time, it wasn't ready for publication, then Christina went off on a trip around the world, and we lost touch. However, we share a lot of friends, so, given the dramatic events concerning the West Pier here in Brighton recently, I thought it would be a good idea to get back in touch and see if the story was still available, because it needed to be published before the complete collapse of the West Pier made a detail in it historically inept. The story has improved over time like a good wine, and I am exceedingly glad that it

Unniversaries

Guest editorial

Paul Brazier

can finally see light of day here. She promises to start writing and sending stories again. It's a shame she ever stopped.

Two writers whose stories first saw light of day in my guest-edited issues of *Interzone* are also represented here. Nigel Brown's near-future story addresses a problem that is chronic but becoming acute the longer it is ignored, and, astonishingly, arrived on my desk at almost exactly the same time as Geoff Ryman's novellette *V.O.R.*, which addresses precisely the same problem, although in a very different manner. Matt Colborn offers a present-day ghost story that was inspired by reading one of Colin Greenland's diary pieces in *SF Nexus*, and illustrates it, as is becoming usual, with his own artwork. Matt finished the manuscript of his first novel late last year, and Nigel Brown told me that he finished his just a few days ago. So we can look forward to more sterling work from them both in the near future.

Daniel Kaysen's was the first story that I received for this issue, and the first one accepted. I asked him for some minor amendments, and as a result he presented me with a whole new story, although recognizably related to the first one. Again, I accepted this, and asked for amendments. Again, he gave me a new, related story, which I accepted subject to amendments, and again, he delivered a very different manuscript from anything I had seen previously. This, with minor changes, is the story that appears here (but he tells me there were actually nine separate versions in all!). I accepted that first story, which was his first sale, something over a year ago now. In the intervening twelve months, he has sold several more stories, including two others to this magazine, and he also has a novel on the way. We have an understanding that if I ever manage to get my own print-on-demand publishing house off the ground, one of my first books will be a compendium of these related stories, and, if he continues to write and

sell at this rate, I can see I will have a bestseller on my hands.

Finally, it has been a long-cherished ambition of mine to get a Jon Courtenay Grimwood story for *Interzone*, and he did submit a very short piece for my Australian issue that appeared in the issue beforehand. This one is much more substantial. The result of a week's solid work was this story and a stonking migraine. Jon says he could get a new novel off the ground with the same effort. I'm very glad he took the trouble, as he is rapidly becoming a best-seller with his North African novels and I doubt he will be free to do any more for us in the near future.

One thing that has become plain over the past eight years or so is that the old boundaries between genre fictions are dissolving. To be sure, there are still galaxy-spanning space operas appearing and selling — the success of Peter F. Hamilton and Alastair Reynolds bears witness to this. But the weirder work, where the science-fictional shades over into the weird, the bizarre, and the outright mystifying, and which used to be such a staple of the sf magazines, appears to be marching across the genre boundaries and establishing beachheads in crime and detective fiction country. Jon Courtenay Grimwood is certainly a part of this invasion, and Michael Marshall Smith appears to be making a determined incursion from the neighbouring horror country. And, just today, I received a new crime novel, *Casual Rex*, by Eric Garcia, which is quite evidently a concerted attempt from the other side of the boundaries to keep control of the weird firmly in the hard-boiled and noir camp. One of the puffs for it says, "A weird and wonderful cross between a Mickey Spillane crime novel and a dodgy late-night sci-fi series." That it is also apparently intended to be (and, from what I've seen thus far, is) hilarious, is probably the only ameliorating factor. Without a doubt, if this had been attempted by a science-fiction writer, it would have been deadly serious. But we in the science-fiction world have to beware. Our audience is being annexed one province at a time by other genres — the crime writers and comedians from this side, and, as Evelyn Lewes points out elsewhere in this issue, the ufologists are making a strong play for the credulous and spiritual part of the sf audience.

As Science Fiction Fans, we should be aware that our genre is in danger of evaporating before our eyes, much as horror already has. But if it does, then we are just going to have to emulate our favourite authors, and move to one of these other genres, where they still do things our way even if they call it something else, and stake our claim there.

Paul Brazier

Birth Days

Geoff Ryman



Today's my 16th birthday, so I gave myself a present.

I came out to my Mom.

Sort of. By accident. I left out a mail from Billy, which I could just have left on the machine, but no, I had to go and print it out and leave it on my night table, looking like a huge white flag.

I get up this morning and I kinda half-notice it's not there. I lump into the kitchen and I can see where it went. The letter is in Mom's hand and the look on her face tells me, yup, she's read it. She has these grey lines down either side of her mouth. She holds it up to me, and says, "Can you tell me why you wouldn't have the courage to tell me this directly?"

And I'm thinking how could I be so dumb? Did I do this to myself deliberately? And I'm also thinking wait a second, where do you get off reading my letters?

So I say to her, "Did you like the part where he says my dick is beautiful?"

She says, "Not much, no." She's already looking at me like I'm an alien. And I'm like: Mom, this is what you get for being NeoChristian – your son turns out to be homo. What the Neos call a Darwinian anomaly.

Mom sighs and says, "Well I suppose we're stuck with it now."

Yeah Mom, you kinda are. Aren't you supposed to say something mimsy like, Ron honey you know we still love you? Not my Mom. Oh no. Saying exactly what she

thinks is Mom's way of being real, and her being real is more important to her than anything else. Like what I might be feeling.

So I dig back at her. "That's a shame, Mom. A few years later and I would have been embryo-screened and you could have just aborted me."

Mom just sniffs. "That was a cheap shot."

Yeah, it was. NeoChristians are about the only people who *don't* abort homosexual foetuses. Everybody else does. What do they call it? Parental choice.

So Mom looks at me with this real tough face and says, "I hope you think you've given yourself a happy birthday." And that's all the conversation we have about it.

My little brother is pretending he isn't there and that he isn't happy. My little brother is shaped like a pineapple. He's fat and he has asthma and he's really good at being sneaky and not playing by the rules. I was always the big brother who tolerated stuff and tried to help Mom along. Her good little boy. Only now I'm samesex. Which to a NeoChristian Mom is like finding out your son likes dressing up as a baby and being jerked off by animals. Sometimes I think Neo is just a way to find new reasons to hate the same old things.

What really dents my paintwork is that Mom is smart. What she likes about Neo is that it's Darwinian. Last summer she's reading this article *Samesex Gene Planted by Aliens*? And she's rolling her eyes at it. "The least they

could do is get the science straight," she says. "It's not one gene and it's not one part of the brain." But then she said, "But you gotta wonder, why is there a gene like that in the first place?"

My Mom really does think that there's a chance that homos are an alien plot. Please do not fall over laughing, it hurts too much.

Ever since the Artefacts were found, people have been imagining little green men landing on this beautiful blue planet and just going off again. So people scare themselves wondering if the aliens are about to come back with a nice big army.

Then about five years ago, it turned out that the genes that control sexual orientation have some very unusual sugars, and all of a sudden there's this conspiracy theory that the aliens created the samesex gene as some kind of weapon. Undermine our reproductive capacity. Even though when they landed we were all triblodites or whatever. Maybe having homos is supposed to soften us up for conquest. Hey, if the aliens invade, I promise, I'll fight too OK?

On my way to school I ring Billy and tell him "Mom found out. She read your mail."

Billy sounds stripped for action, "Did she go crazy?"

"She went laconic. You could just hear her thinking: you gotta own this, Ronald, you did this to yourself, Ronald."

"It's better than crying."

Billy's in Comportment class. He believes all that shit. To be fair to him, that "you gotta own this" was me digging at some of the stuff he comes out with. That stuff pisses me off. In fact right now, everything pisses me off. Right now, it's like my guts are twisting and I want to go break something.

Comportment says you've got to own the fact people don't like you, own the fact you got fat hips, own the fact you're no good in math, own the fact that glacial lakes are collapsing onto Tibetan monasteries. Comportment says hey, you're complaining about the Chinese treatment of Tibet, but what have you personally done about it?

It's like: we'll make everybody who has no power feel it's their fault if stuff goes wrong, so the big people don't have to do anything about it.

My Mom hates me being a homo. She likes being a big tough lady even more. So, she like, doesn't get all upset or cry or even say much about it. Being a tough lady is her way of feeling good about her son being an alien plot.

Billy is too focused on being Joe Cool-and-Out to cut me any slack. His stab at being sympathetic is "You should have just told her straight up, like I told you."

I say back to him in this Minnie-Mouse voice, "I acknowledge that you are absolutely right." That's another line he's used on me.

He's silent for a sec and then says, "Well, don't be a bitch with me about it."

"It's my authentic response to an emotionally charged situation." Still sounding like Minnie Mouse.

I'm mad at him. I'm mad at him because he just won't unbend. Nobody unbends. It's bad comportment.

Billy comes back at me. "This is just you going back to

being a baby. Only you don't have tantrums, you just whine."

"Billy. My NeoChristian Mom now knows I'm samesex. Could I have some sympathy?"

"Who's died, Ron? Anybody dead around here? Did you lose any limbs in the detonation? Or are you just getting all significant on my ass?"

"No. I'm looking for a friend. I'll try and find one, you know, someone who likes me and not my dick?"

And I hang up.

Like I said, I'm so mad.

I'm mad sitting here right now. I got my stupid kid brother who's been giggling all day, like it's such an achievement he likes pussy. I got my Mom doing the household accounts and her shares and her rollovers, and she's bellowing into the voice recognition and it's like: look at me having to do all the work around here. I'm realizing that I've probably screwed up my relationship with Billy and wondering if I really am the incredible wimp he thinks I am.

It's like everything all around me is Jell-O and it's setting into lemon-lime, which I hate. I'm out. My brother knows and will try to give me a hard time, and if he does I'll slug his fat face. My Mom is being hard ass, and so I'm going to be hard ass back. I'm not an athlete, I'm not Joe Cool-and-Out, and I'll never go to Mom's Neo seminars.

I'm just sitting here all alone thinking: how can I win? What can I do?

I'll never be able to be a good little boy again. That is not an option. I'm not interested in being political about who I sleep with. I don't sign up to anything, I don't believe anything, and I don't like anybody, and I don't think anybody likes me.

Hey. A fresh start. Happy birthday.

So, 26 today!

I got up at 3.00 am and holloed over to the Amazon to say hi to João. He looked so happy to see me, his little face was just one huge smile. He'd organized getting some of his sisters to line up behind him. They all waved and smiled and downloaded me a smart diary for my present. In Brazil, they still sing Happy Birthday.

Love conquers all. With a bit of work.

I called João later and we did our usual daily download. His testosterone levels were through the roof, he's getting so stimulated by his new job in the Indian Devolved Areas. He's about to go off to Eden to start his diplomatic work. He looks so sweet in a penis sheath and a parrot's feather through his nose. Standard diplomatic dress for a member of the Brazilian Consular Team.

I love him I love him I love him I love him.

I am so god damned lucky. They didn't have embryo-screening on the Amazon. Hey! A fellow sodomite. We're an endangered species everywhere else. Must eliminate those nasty alien genes.

Then I had to go and tell him about how my project was going. And he looked glum.

"I know you don't like it," I told him.

"It feels wrong. Like genocide." He pronounces it

jenoseed. "Soon they will be no more."

"But it's not genocide. The babies come out hetero, that's all. No more same-sex, no more screening, just happy babies. And the adults who are left can decide for themselves if they want to be cured or not. Anyway, the Neos say that *we're* the genocide."

"You don't need to help them."

"João. Baby. It won't affect us. We'll still have each other."

"The Indians say it is unwise."

"Do they? That's interesting. How come?"

"They say it is good to have other ways. They think it is like what almost happened to them."

That rang true. So me and João have this really great conversation about it, very neutral, very scientific. He's just so smart.

Before the alien gene thing, they used to say that homos were a pool of altruistic non-reproducing labour. It's like, we baby-sit for our siblings' kids and that increases the survival potential of our family's genes. Because a gene that makes it unlikely that you'll have kids should have died out. So why was it still here?

João tells his usual joke about all the singers in Brazil being same-sex, which is just about true. So I say, wow, the human race couldn't reproduce without *Dança do Brasil*, huh? Which was a joke. And he says, maybe so.

I say like I always do, "You know, don't you, baby?"

His voice goes soft and warm. "I know. Do you know?"

Yes. Oh yes, I know.

That you love me. We love each other.

We've been saying that every day now for five years. It still gives me a buzz.

It was a big day at the lab too. The lights finally went on inside Flat Man.

Flat Man is pretty horrible, to tell you the truth. He's a culture, only the organs are differentiated and the bones are wafer-thin and spread out in a support structure. He looks like a cross between a spider's web and somebody who's been hit by a truck. And he covers an entire wall.

His brain works, but we know for a fact that it performs physical functions only. No consciousness, no narrative-of-the-self. He's like a particularly useful bacterial culture. You get to map all his processes, test the drugs, maybe fool around with his endomorphins. They got this microscope that can trail over every part of his body. You can see life inside him, pumping away.

Soon as I saw him, I got this flash. I knew what to do with him. I went to my mentor, wrote it up, got it out and the company gave me the funding.

People think of cells as these undifferentiated little bags. In fact, they're more like a city with a good freeway system. The proteins get shipped in, they move into warehouses, they're distributed when needed, used up and then shipped out.

We used to track proteins by fusing them with fluorescent jellyfish protein. They lit up. Which was just brilliant really since every single molecule of that protein was lit up all the time. You sure could see where all of it was, but you just couldn't see where it was going to.

We got a different tag now, one that fluoresces only once it's been hit by a blue laser. We can paint individual protein molecules and track them one by one.

Today we lit up the proteins produced by the same-sex markers. I'm tracking them in different parts of the brain. Then I'll track how genetic surgery affects the brain cells. How long it takes to stimulate the growth of new structures. How long it takes to turn off production of other proteins and churn the last of them out through the lysosomes.

How long it takes to cure being homo.

It's a brilliantly simple project and it will produce a cheap reliable treatment. It means that all of João's friends who are fed up being hassled by Evangelicals can decide to go hetero.

That's my argument. They can decide. Guys who want to stay same-sex like me... well, we can. And after us maybe there won't be any more homosexuals. I really don't know what the problem with that is. Who'll miss us? Other same-sexers looking for partners? Uh, hello, they're won't be any.

And yes, part of me thinks it will be a shame that nobody else will get to meet their João. But they'll meet their Joanna instead.

Mom rang up and talked for like 17 hours. I'm not scared that I don't love her anymore. I do love her, a lot, but in my own exasperated way. She's such a character. She volunteered for our stem cell regime. She came in and nearly took the whole damn programme over, everybody loved her. So now she's doing weights, and is telling me about this California toy boy she's picked up. She does a lot of neat stuff for the Church, I gotta say, she's really in there helping. She does future therapy, the Church just saw how good she is with people, so they sent her in to help people change and keep up and not be frightened of science.

She tells me, "God is Science. It really is and I just show people that." She gets them using their Personalized Identity for the first time, she gets them excited by stuff. Then she makes peanut butter sandwiches for the homeless.

We talk a bit about my showbiz kid brother. He's a famous sex symbol. I can't get over it. I still think he looks like a pineapple.

"Both my kids turned out great," says Mom. "Love you."

I got to work and the guys had pasted a little card to the glass. *Happy Birthday Ron, from Flat Man.*

And at lunchtime, they did this really great thing. They set up a collimated lens in front of the display screen. The image isn't any bigger, but the lens makes your eyes focus as if you are looking at stuff that's ten kilometres away.

Then they set up a mini-cam, and flew it over Flat Man. I swear to God, it was like being a test pilot over a planet made of flesh. You fly over the bones and they look like salt flats. You zoom up and over muscle tissue that looks like rope mountains. The veins look like tubular trampolines.

Then we flew into the brain, right down into the cortex creases and out over the amygdala, seat of sexual ori-

entation. It looked like savannah.

"We call this Flanneryland," said Greg. So they all took turns trying to think of a name for our new continent. I guess you could say I have their buy-in. The project cooks.

I got back home and found João had sent me a couple of sweet little extra emails. One of them was a list of all his family's addresses ...*but my best address is in the heart of Ronald Flannery.*

And I suppose I ought to tell you that I also got an encryption from Billy.

Billy was my first boyfriend back in high school and it wasn't until I saw his signature that I realized who it was and that I'd forgotten his last name. Wow, was this mail out of line.

I'll read it to you. *Ron*, it starts out, *long time no see. I seem to recall that you were a Libra, so your birthday must be about now, so, happy birthday. You may have heard that I'm running for public office here in Palm Springs* – well actually, Billy, no I haven't, I don't exactly scan the press for news about you or Palm Springs.

He goes on to say how he's running on a Save Same-sex ticket. I mean, what are we, whales? And who's going to vote for that? How about dealing with some other people's issues as well, Billy? You will get like 200 votes at most. But hey, Billy doesn't want to actually *win* or achieve anything, he just wants to be right. So listen to this –

I understand that you are still working for Lumiere Laboratories. According to this week's LegitSci News they're the people that are doing a cure for homosexuality that will work on adults. Can this possibly be true? If so could you give me some more details? I am assuming that you personally have absolutely nothing to do with such a project. To be direct, we need to know about this treatment: how it works, how long a test regime it's on, when it might be available. Otherwise it could be the last straw for an orientation that has produced oh, ... and listen to this, virtue by association, the same old tired list ... Shakespeare, Michaelangelo, da Vinci, Melville, James, Wittgenstein, Turing... still no women, I see.

I mean, this guy is asking me to spy on my own company. Right? He hasn't got in touch since high school, how exploitative is that? And then he says, and this is the best bit, *or are you just being a good little boy again?*

No, I'm being a brilliant scientist, and I could just as easily produce a list of great heterosexuals, but thanks for getting in a personal dig right at the end of the letter. Very effective, Billy, a timely reminder of why I didn't even like you by the end and why we haven't been in touch.

And why you are not going to get even a glimmer of a reply. Why in fact, I'm going to turn this letter in to my mentor. Just to show I don't do this shit and that somebody else has blabbed to the media.

Happy effin birthday.

And now I'm back here, sitting on my bed, talking to my diary, wondering who it's for. Who I am accountable to? Why do I read other people's letters to it?

And why do I feel that when this project is finished I'm going to do something to give something back. To whom?

To, and this is a bit of a surprise for me, to my people.

I'm about to go to sleep, and I'm lying here, hugging the shape of João's absence.

Today's my birthday and we all went to the beach.

You haven't lived until you body surf freshwater waves, on a river that's so wide you can't see the other bank, with an island in the middle that's the size of Belgium and Switzerland combined.

We went to Mosquerio, lounged on hammocks, drank beer, and had cupu-çu ice cream. You don't get cupu-çu fruit anywhere else and it makes the best ice cream in the world.

Because of the babies I had to drink coconut milk straight from the coconut... what a penance... and I lay on my tummy on the sand. I still wore my sexy green trunks.

Nilson spiked me. "João! Our husband's got an arse like a baboon!"

It is kind of ballooning out. My whole lower bowel is stretched like an oversized condom, which actually feels surprisingly sexy. I roll over to show off my packet. That always inspires comment. This time from Guillaume. "João! Nilson, his dick is as big as you are! Where do you put it?"

"I don't love him for his dick," says João. Which can have a multitude of meanings if you're the first pregnant man in history, and your bottom is the seat of both desire and rebirth.

Like João told me before I came out here, I have rarity value on the Amazon. A tall *branco* in Brazil... I keep getting dragged by guys, and if I'm not actually being dragged then all I have to do is follow people's eye lines to see what's snagged their attention. It's flattering and depersonalising all at one and the same time.

The only person who doesn't do it is João. He just looks into my eyes. I look away and when I look back, he's still looking into my eyes.

He's proud of me.

In fact, all those guys, they're all proud of me. They all feel I've done something for them.

What I did was grow a thick pad in Flat Man's bowel. Thick enough for the hooks of a placenta to attach to safely.

I found a way to overcome the resistance in sperm to being penetrated by other sperm. The half pairs of chromosomes line up and join.

The project-plan people insisted we test it on animals. I thought that was disgusting, I don't know why, I just hated it. What a thing to do to a chimp. And anyway, it would still need testing on people, afterwards.

And anyway, I didn't want to wait.

So I quit the company and came to live in Brazil. João got me a job at the university. I teach Experimental Methods in very bad Portuguese. I help out explaining why Science is God.

It's funny seeing the Evangelicals trying to come to terms. The police have told me, watch out, there are people saying the child should not be born. The police themselves, maybe. I look into their tiny dark eyes and they don't look too friendly.

João is going to take me to Eden to have the baby. It is Indian territory, and the Indians want it to be born. There is something about some story they have, about how the world began again, and keeps re-birthing.

Agosto and Guillinho roasted the chicken. Adalberto, Kawé, Jorge and Carlos sat around in a circle shelling the dried prawns. The waiter kept coming back and asking if we wanted more beer. He was this skinny kid from Marajo with nothing to his name but shorts, flip-flops and a big grin in his dark face. Suddenly we realize that he's dragging us. Nilson starts singing, "*Moreno, Moreno...*" which means sexy brown man. Nilson got the kid to sit on his knee.

This place is paradise for gays. We must be around 4 per cent of the population. It's the untouched natural same-sex demographic, about the same as for left-handedness. It's like being in a country where they make clothes in your size or speak your maternal language, or where you'd consider allowing the President into your house for dinner.

It's home.

We got back and all and I mean *all* of João's huge family had a party for my birthday. His nine sisters, his four brothers and their spouses and their kids. That's something else you don't get in our big bright world. Huge tumbling families. It's like being in a 19th-century novel every day. Umberto gets a job, Maria comes off the booze, Latitia gets over fancying her cousin, João helps his nephew get into university. Hills of children roll and giggle on the carpet. You can't sort out what niece belongs to which sister, and it doesn't matter. They all just sleep over where they like.

Senhora da Souza's house was too small for them all, so we hauled the furniture out into the street and we all sat outside in a circle, drinking and dancing and telling jokes I couldn't understand. The Senhora sat next to me and held my hand. She made this huge cupu-açu cream, because she knows I love it so much.

People here get up at five am when it's cool, so they tend to leave early. By ten o'clock, it was all over. João's sisters lined up to give me a kiss, all those children tumbled into cars, and suddenly, it was just us. I have to be careful about sitting on the babies too much, so I decided not to drive back. I'm going to sleep out in the courtyard on a mattress with João and Nilson.

We washed up for the Senhora, and I came out here onto this unpaved Brazilian street to do my diary.

Mom hates that I'm here. She worries about malaria, she worries that I don't have a good job. She's bewildered by my being pregnant. "I don't know baby, if it happens, and it works, who's to say?"

"It means the aliens' plot's backfired, right?"

"Aliens," she says back real scornful. "If they wanted the planet, they could just have burned off the native life forms, planted a few of their own and come back. Even our padre thinks that's a dumb idea now. You be careful, babe. You survive. OK?"

OK. I'm 36 and still good looking. I'm 36 and finally I'm some kind of a rebel.

I worry though, about the Nilson thing.

OK, João and I had to be apart for five years. It's natural he'd shack up with somebody in my absence and I do believe he loves me, and I was a little bit jealous at first... sorry, I'm only human. But hey – heaps of children on the floor, right? Never know who's sleeping with whom? I moved in with them, and I quite fancy Nilson, but I don't love him, and I wouldn't want to have his baby.

Only... maybe I am.

You are supposed to have to treat the sperm first to make them receptive to each other, and I am just not sure, there is no way to identify, when I became pregnant. But OK, we're all one big family, they've both ... been down there. And I started to feel strange and sick before João's and my sperm were... um... planted.

Thing is, we only planted one embryo. And now there's twins.

I mean, it would be wild wouldn't it if one of the babies were Nilson and João's? And I was just carrying it, like a pod?

Oh man. Happy birthday.

Happy birthday, moon. Happy birthday, sounds of TVs, flip-flop sandals from feet you can't see, distant dogs way off on the next street, insects creaking away. Happy birthday, night. Which is as warm and sweet as hot honeyed milk.

Tomorrow, I'm off to Eden, to give birth.

46 years old. What a day to lose a baby.

They had to fly me back out in a helicopter. There was blood gushing out, and João said he could see the placenta. Chefe said it was OK to send in the helicopter. João was still in Consular garb. He looked so tiny and defenceless in just a penis sheath. He has a little pot belly now. He was so terrified, his whole body had gone yellow. We took off, and I feel like I'm melting into a swamp, all brown mud, and we look out and there's Nilson with the kids, looking forlorn and waving goodbye. And I feel this horrible grinding milling in my belly.

I'm so fucking grateful for this hospital. The Devolved Areas are great when you're well and pumped up, and you can take huts and mud and mosquitoes and snake for dinner. But you do not want to have a miscarriage in Eden. A miscarriage in the bowel is about five times more serious than one in the womb. A centimetre or two more of tearing and most of the blood in my body would have blown out in two minutes.

I am one very lucky guy.

The Doctor was João's friend Nadia, and she was just fantastic with me. She told me what was wrong with the baby.

"It's a good thing you lost it," she told me. "It would not have had much of a life."

I just told her the truth. I knew this one felt different from the start; it just didn't feel right.

It's what I get for trying to have another baby at 45. I was just being greedy. I told her. *É a ultima vez*. This is the last time.

Chega, she said, Enough. But she was smiling. *É o trabalho do João*. From now on, it's João's job.

Then we had a serious conversation, and I'm not sure I understood all her Portuguese. But I got the gist of it.

She said: it's not like you don't have enough children.

When João and I first met, it was like the world was a flower that had bloomed. We used to lie in each other's arms and he, being from a huge family, would ask, "How many babies?" and I'd say "Six," thinking that was a lot. It was just a fantasy then, some way of echoing the feeling we had of being a union. And he would say no, no, ten. Ten babies. Ten babies would be enough.

We have fifteen.

People used to wonder what reproductive advantage homosexuality conferred.

Imagine you sail iceberg-oceans in sealskin boats with crews of 20 men, and that your skiff gets shipwrecked on an island, no women anywhere. Statistically, one of those 20 men would be same-sex-orientated, and if receptive, he would nest the sperm of many men inside him. Until one day, like with Nilson and João, two sperm interpenetrated. Maybe more. The bearer probably died, but at least there was a chance of a new generation. And they all carried the genes.

Homosexuality was a fallback reproductive system.

Once we knew that, historians started finding myths of male pregnancy all over the place. Adam giving birth to Eve, Vishnu on the serpent Anata giving birth to Brahma. And there were all the virgin births as well,

with no men necessary.

Now we don't have to wait for accidents.

I think Nadia said, *You and João, you're pregnant in turns or both of you are pregnant at the same time. You keep having twins. Heterosexual couples don't do that. And if you count husband no 3, Nilson, that's another five children. Twenty babies in ten years?*

"Chega," I said again.

"Chega," she said, but it wasn't a joke. *Of course the women, the lesbians are doing the same thing now too. Ten years ago, everybody thought that homosexuality was dead and that you guys were on the endangered list. But you know, any reproductive advantage over time leads to extinction of rivals.*

Nadia paused and smiled. *I think we are the endangered species now.*

Happy birthday.

Geoff Ryman is a bold adventurer in the Indiana Jones mould, which means he has a flat on the Amazon and friends in Cambodia. His recent publishing is a train wreck. St Martins in the United States has taken it upon itself to publish *Lust* in August 2003, and an SF novel, *Air* this coming September. *Air* is about the last village in the world to go online before a new technology takes over. The first draft was finished in 1996. Peter Crowther recently published a novella, *V.A.O.* Geoff is currently writing a mainstream novel about Cambodia. He is also looking for seasonal summer employment in the UK, as he is now too old to sell his body. All offers considered.

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Nigel Brown

Blue dawn light seeped around the frayed curtains, throwing shadows across the small bedroom, and the hump of her gently snoring roommate Betty.

Eloise was already awake. A vision of the Eastern Mediterranean glowed in her left eye, offering a tantalizing glimpse of life two thousand miles beyond the cold plaster walls. She drank in the scene until the sun, outside her window, rose higher; a sunbeam found a chink in the curtains. The sudden glare blinded her; the cataract in her natural right eye dispersed the light into a white fog. It bleached out her cyberspace vision – her private escape.

Eloise reluctantly shut her left eye down. The Aegean, shimmering in the Mediterranean light, vanished. Now she stared, unfocused, at the ceiling. Bright after-images danced over its dark surface.

Suddenly aware of the room around her, she took shallow breaths through her mouth to endure the stink. It lay like a thick blanket in the heady air: Betty was never one for getting to her chamber pot at night.

It's ridiculous, she thought. We've got automation so

good: robots... even robots that are self-aware, and this dump still uses chamber pots.

The answer lurked at the back of her mind – “Because you’re at the bottom of the heap, dear... you let yourself drift down there. Artificial minds, robots, cost a lot more money now than you have left...”

That’s why...

Something flicked through her mind – a fleeting thought she tried to catch, nearly held – then the screaming across the corridor began. The thought left her, driven out by old Arnold’s cries.

Eloise lay patiently in bed, listening out for the pattering footsteps of the Duty Carer, the creak of Arnold’s door, then silence as his medication was administered.

The thought crept back into her head and settled there, triggering a spark of excitement... today was a trip out of the home – the visit to the Annuity Clinic.

Breakfast was the usual chaos, with Betty extracting her mouthplate and tossing it onto the table, narrowly missing her bowl of cornflakes. Eloise had learned to shield her food with her hand, and place a shaky palm

over the heaped cereal to avoid the spray of spittle that came from the babbling Katie sitting on her other side.

"Ready for the bus today, Eloise?"

She looked up to see the Matron, Mrs Whitten, standing over her.

"I'm always grateful for a trip outside," she said carefully.

Mrs Whitten frowned. "You have plenty of trips, Eloise. We're contracted to supply one trip a month – that's what you get."

"Thank you," Eloise answered.

Katie mumbled something incoherent to the Matron. A look of disgust crossed Mrs Whitten's face, and she turned to go.

"Will my room's internet link be repaired soon?"

"It's on my list," Mrs Whitten said. Then her eyes widened with understanding. She peered at Eloise's sapphire eye, and gave a sharp nod. "Oh I see! You'll lose access when that eye goes, won't you?" She sniffed. "I could never afford an interface eye like that... you'll get by – like the rest of us."

"I'm sure I will," Eloise answered, "but with my eye gone, I'll be cut off in my room..."

"Maybe for a while," Mrs Whitten replied, "but you'll have the money – with that eye sold – to continue living here." She gave a wide smile. "That's a consolation, don't you think?"

Her words haunted Eloise the whole of the coach trip to the Clinic. Lost in her thoughts – dreaming of her sister's house and family on the warm Aegean – she ignored the bleak scenery through the window: the scrubby Sussex tundra running up to the dark fir-line that rimmed the South Downs.

They hurried off the coach, shivering in the raw northerly wind that blew off the Midlands glacier. The Clinic was a low, small windowed building that ran along one side of the town's bus terminal.

Eloise glanced wistfully at the other buses, but she had no money, no permit... no where else to go.

"This *global warming's* boiling my blood!" Betty managed to joke.

Eloise smiled at the irony. They were all old enough to remember the predictions of vineyards in Southern England. No one listened to warnings that the Gulf Stream might shut down.

We push bad news to the back of our minds, she mused, knowing that we lose it there.

So how could she blame the country for her own predicament, when pension poverty had been predicted for so long?

The Annuity Clinic's waiting room was full up by the time she managed to shuffle inside. She didn't regret not getting a seat as her hip made it difficult to stand up again.

"How long'll we be 'ere?"

She turned at the sound.

"I don't know, Arnold," she replied. "They said it was for pre-assessments. I guess they need to know how much work to prepare for when we come back to have

bits chopped out of us."

He looked startled at her tone.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean it to come out like that."

His face was a pasty yellow – Eloise couldn't decide whether it was anaemia or the effect of his daily sedative – but, far from his usual drowsiness, he seemed lucid enough now.

It must have been the novelty of a trip outside the home, she decided. That was understandable. Despite what Mrs Whitten had said, they rarely left their building.

Eloise looked around the reception area with interest, but found nothing extraordinary about the place. The grubby posters (static, not even active!) and the chipped magnolia paintwork reminded her of every other National Health Clinic she had ever been inside; the only feature that told her this was the mid-21st century was the robotic receptionist.

She cast a professional eye over the model – an A-series 412. Cheap and nasty, with barely enough processing power to do the job. She had spent her working life in the industry, and had never trusted the 412s.

Then, to her surprise, the robot's head swivelled round to face her.

"Eloise Harvey?" it said. The voice was a soft contralto (she guessed its voice box had been upgraded to make the robot appear a better model than it really was – a typical State wallpaper job).

"Yes," she answered. Despite her previous determination to be brave today, her voice came out strained – reedy. "I'm Miss Harvey. Is it time? Is it my turn now?"

"Could you please go to the Adjunct's office," the receptionist lifted a mannequin arm and pointed to an anonymous door to the side. "The Adjunct requests a meeting."

What could it mean? The others all looked at her, glad they were not the one's being singled out. Life in the Home did that to you – made you strive to keep a low profile – not stand out or be a troublemaker, then a target.

Another voice – a man's – boomed out from a speaker on the receptionist's desk: "We're not ready for you yet, Miss Harvey, but a quick word in my office would be of benefit."

Arnold nudged her as she passed, and rolled his eyes in mock terror. "They want to chop out more than just yer fancy eye, Ellie," he said.

"At least I'll be walking out of her on my own two feet," she shot back at him, glancing down at his artificial leg.

Betty just tittered as Eloise fumbled with the door handle. She was grateful to close the door on Betty's parting words: "Offer him yer body, love! Maybe he'll let yer keep all of it, afterwards!"

The Adjunct sat at a desk. Eloise realized with surprise that it was also a robot, though a more advanced model than the A412 outside.

Probably one of the T-series, she speculated. Despite her nerves, she felt a small thrill to be in its presence.

This was one of the sentient models – as close to artificial intelligence our technology could build. It had been years since she'd had the opportunity to be close to such an advanced model.

Once an engineer, she said to herself, always an engineer.

Its soft flesh tones and shiny black hair, with those animated, expressive eyes, would have fooled her in a poorer light – although she'd known residents in the Home who'd botoxed their skin into immobility and worn toupees... they'd looked more robotic than the machine facing her.

But didn't the NHS run to *any* human staff, these days?

"Please," it said, indicating the high backed chair facing it. "Sit down."

"Why am I here?" she asked. "have I done something wrong?"

"Not at all," the Adjunct said. "I was reviewing your case, and felt it would be useful to speak to you in person."

Eloise gave it a doubtful look.

"All my documents were sent in last week. I don't think there's anything wrong. My implant is still good, isn't it?"

"Yes," the Adjunct said. "As of this moment, your ocular implant is worth 10,631 credits to the Micronesian market – that is where we can get the best price for you."

"Micronesia?"

"Our brokerage service is unrivalled in this part of Southern England," the Adjunct reassured her. "The technology built into your eye is in great demand on the Kiribati exchange."

"Oh, I'm sure you'll get me the best price for my eye," Eloise said.

"It will buy you an annuity you can live on," the Adjunct reassured her, repeating the Clinic's mantra.

She'd read that slogan on the board outside.

"So what did you want to see me about?"

The Adjunct didn't answer her at first. Its eyes seemed to defocus and stare into the middle distance, then: "What do you see before you?"

She stared at the Adjunct.

"I see a T-series machine, made to look like a man, but your flesh is too pink, your hair is too shiny."

"I am the Adjunct of this Clinic, perfectly constructed for my work..." it said. "If you were to look below my waist you would see that I protrude out of the back of this desk unit."

She gave a short sigh. The possibility of danger hadn't occurred to her before...

"Don't worry!" it exclaimed, picking up on her thought. "I cannot hurt you. I am totally immobile."

It lowered its head to avoid her steady gaze.

"But I would not hurt you," it continued. "I used to be known by you as Clever Dolly."

Eloise frowned. Her wrinkled forehead screwed up further.

"Clever Dolly?"

"You had a doll when you were six years old," the Adjunct reminded her. "You kept it for four years, spoke to it, played with it... the sentient processor within it lives within me now."

Her eyes widened.

"Oh my!" she exclaimed. "You mean that you're my Clever Dolly... all grown up?"

"Yes, in a way," the Adjunct admitted. "I recall my time with you – no memories are ever lost for my kind."

"But..." Eloise said, "How do I know that this is the truth?"

The Adjunct gave a human shrug. "Why should I lie to you?"

Her eyes narrowed again: "If you're really my Clever Dolly, you'd know where I kept my secret diary."

The Adjunct was silent for a moment. She guessed it was searching its memory core.

"You had no secret diary, but I recall you would hide secret messages inside Teddy Bear and Kangaroo's pouch."

She felt her cheeks blush at its words.

"Well!" was all she could manage. Her face screwed up with concentration. "I remember the day my father brought you home. I was the first child in my school to have a Clever Dolly."

"I was an early model," the Adjunct said. "When you grew out of me – and I bear you no ill will – I was sold back to the toy store, then dismantled for my sentient processor."

Eloise gazed around the small office, taking in the shuttered window, the filing cabinet, the desk, the picture of some lost Sussex countryside (showing a summer of corn, haystacks and sunshine). It struck her that the picture was as far removed from the present reality of Southern England's tundra as this mimic sitting before her was from a real human being.

"So you ended up here," she said. "What a coincidence, us meeting like this!"

"It was not a coincidence," the Adjunct said. "When I saw your name on the application list, I made certain that you were brought to this Clinic."

"Whatever for?" Eloise asked.

"I need you to help me," it replied, "to leave this place."

"But why?" she said, startled by its sudden pleading tone.

It leaned forward as far as it could: "Because I'm unable to move from this desk; because I'm trapped here, seeing the world outside through my window or the net screen; because I remember my time with you, being carried through the world – each moment an exploration – every moment a new thing: need I go on?"

Eloise was quiet for a moment, then she said in a firm voice: "You're a machine, made to work here. If you were to leave, what would you do? How would you go?"

"I don't know," it admitted. "I am unable to think of a solution to this problem."

"Well," she answered. "I don't see how I can help you."

"So you won't help."

"I can't," she said. "How could I? Would you expect me to carry you out of here?" Her voice softened. "I'm so sorry."

The Adjunct's head dipped down.

For a horrible moment, Eloise wondered if it had switched itself off with despair.

Then it spoke: "I bear you no ill will. Indeed, I fear that your attendance here is as futile for yourself as it has been for me. You see, I have information about your operation, figures not generally available to the public..."

She stiffened.

"Our private Clinic results show that patients who

undergo your type of operation have a reduced lifespan afterward." It peered at her. "I am sorry to tell you this, but any annuity you receive for the sale of your eye is unlikely to benefit you for more than two years, at most."

"Is the operation dangerous?"

"No," it said, "it's perfectly safe. Our clinic figures are simply an average."

Eloise shrugged. "I'm old," she muttered. "I don't need you to tell me that... if losing one eye gives me a better life, even for a few years, it's worth it."

The Adjunct considered her words.

"How do you humans accept incompleteness so readily?"

"Life teaches us," she said sadly. "Being human means we can regret mistakes we've made in the past... or have dreams... aspirations for the future." She gazed at it with pity. "Sometimes it's worth being incomplete," she added, "if you're human."

Outside the office, the others wanted to know what had happened – what had taken so long.

"Took yer time, Ellie!" Betty leered at her. "Them old bones ain't what they were!"

Arnold was kinder, but she still evaded his questioning.

"It was about my annuity," she told him.

"Humph!" he muttered. "I know you'll get more than me. Legs is worth less than internet-seeing eyes, I reckon."

That night, when Betty nodded off into restless sleep, Eloise dared to activate her sapphire eye.

She couldn't afford to use it much – what she had left from her pension didn't stretch to always-on linkage fees, and the battery was becoming more expensive each time she replaced it.

At first the view was blurred, but it soon resolved into a virtual access window that floated in front of her face, intense colours her own cataract-cursed eye could no longer appreciate.

She gasped at the brilliance of the neurally enhanced colours: the deep emerald of the window's border, the glowing scarlet access icons.

She felt crushed by the thought that she had to give this up... exchange it for tapping away at a slow, fuzzy, filthy screen.

But she had no choice. She needed the money to live, even if it was in a dump like this.

The thought brought her up short – she shouldn't waste precious time on-line. Staring, and deliberately blinking, at the correct icons, Eloise swiftly navigated her way through the Net until she came to her sister's cyberspace.

There it was: Val's beautiful cottage. Its whitewashed stucco walls and red tiled roof contrasted vividly against the luscious green garden foliage that spread down to the deep blue Aegean beyond. Eloise tried to pick out the flowers Val had planted since her last holo had been taken... was there a new bed of roses behind the fountain? The English species had really taken to the Greek coast since the loss of the Gulf Stream had killed off so

many native creatures and plants.

And it was killing her. When she finally got around to following Val South, it was too late. The Southern Countries had shaved their quotas to the bone before she could escape England...

A cursor blinked in the corner of her vision. Her credit was running out.

She watched the scene until it blanked, leaving her staring at the ceiling in her room.

Betty turned over, mumbled something, and sighed as the stench of urine soaking into her bedclothes filled the room.

Eloise waited until her roommate was fast asleep again, then hauled herself out of bed. She bent down, trying not to grunt with the effort, and reached underneath the bed.

Her personal box – what they let you keep in this place – was undisturbed. There was nothing valuable there – everything had long been sold on. After a moment's rummaging she found what she was looking for.

* * *

The following week, as she boarded the coach to the Clinic, she hoped she'd remembered everything.

"Hurry up, Eloise! The knife's waiting for you." It was Mrs Whitten, already sitting by the driver. She scribed off her name on a small datapad.

"Are you coming with us, today?" Eloise asked.

This was unexpected. She knew it could ruin her plan.

"I wouldn't miss it for the *world*!" Mrs Whitten gave her a brief smile, a flash of small, sharp teeth. "Got to make sure my *guests* are all right..." her gaze flicked down to Eloise's hands. "What's in the bag, dearie?"

"Just some knitting," Eloise replied. "I don't know how long I'll be waiting." She smiled weakly back, her heart thumping... praying that the Matron wouldn't demand to have a peek inside.

"Oh," the Matron said, losing interest. "By the way, dear. I've had some trouble getting an internet connection for your room... they won't give a time when they can come and do it."

Eloise nodded. "I'll look forward to it," she said, politely.

She knew that nothing would be gained by causing a fuss – and after today, what did it matter?

She spent the journey to the Clinic going over her plan carefully. It wouldn't do to forget any crucial parts of it.

The reception room was less crowded than before.

"We've got fifteen forearms, three legs below the knee, and an ocular implant booked," Mrs Whitten told the receptionist.

Eloise eyed the Adjunct's office door. From where she stood, it was no more than ten feet away – ten feet that might as well be one hundred miles, she thought.

Mrs Whitten was busy at the desk, making sure that the annuity money was paid directly into the Homes account.

"Am I the last to go in, Mrs Whitten?" Eloise said.

"What?"

"I'd like to finish off my knitting..."

A flicker of irritation crossed the Matron's face. "Yes, if you like."

Eloise nodded her thanks, and shuffled away – vaguely in the direction of the Adjunct's door.

Her heart thumping, she glanced around at the others. Arnold was gloomily staring at the carpet, no doubt contemplating the imminent loss of his right foot – Betty was humming to herself, a glazed look in her eyes.

As quick as she could, Eloise reached out and grasped the door handle. It turned easily. She slipped inside, closing the door quietly behind her.

The Adjunct looked up when she entered. For a moment, she saw its inhumanity – its blank stare – then the eyes came to life, focused on her standing there.

"I haven't much time: listen – my operation's due for today. Could you use my annuity money, from the sale of my eye, to buy me a coach ticket?"

The Adjunct gave a nod. "I can do this. I have enough discretion in the running of this Clinic to hold your annuity credit in a separate account – one I can create for the purpose – and to buy what you want. But where would you wish to go?"

Eloise's voice trembled as she told it about her sister, and gave it her sister's address.

"The Mediterranean League," it considered. "You would need a permit to go there."

That was the difficult part. It was something a person like Eloise would never be issued with; she was too old, too useless to a society like that of the Aegean State for them to allow her to live there...

"Your date of birth would be the problem..." the Adjunct mused.

Eloise had the impression that it was enjoying this challenge.

"...if I make a small amendment to your date of birth that would bring you in under the age limit..."

It looked at her.

"I could do it. Someone with your experience in robotics will always be welcomed."

She breathed a sigh of relief.

"But why should I do this?" the Adjunct asked.

Her knees felt weak. She lifted her bag, and pulled out the doll with trembling fingers.

"A Clever Dolly," it remarked.

"You," she simply said.

There was a silence – an aeon in computer time – then the Adjunct made a strange gargling noise.

"You kept me?" it said.

Somehow, she heard astonishment in that level voice.

"I didn't," she confessed, "But my mother did. When she died, some of her possessions – the worthless ones that the Council didn't take for keeping her – were passed on to me. This was one of them."

She looked down at the grubby doll. Its cloth body flopped in her hand, the only hi-tech indication was its round, moulded head, with its empty chip-slot in the back.

"It was worthless, but it wasn't very big. I kept it to remind me more of my mother than of my childhood."

The Adjunct's eyes gleamed. "This is an unexpected thing. Thank you for showing me the doll."

Eloise glanced back at the door. It wouldn't do for Mrs Whitten to hear her plan

* * *

They did the operation under a local, keeping up a cheerful banter as they cut out her precious sapphire eye, disconnecting her optic nerve from the micro-circuitry – leaving her lying there with a black eye-patch like a pirate.

They tried the patch for size, then took it off to trim its edge.

"Don't I get an artificial eye?" she asked. "Just a painted one?"

The surgeon's eyebrows arched at her. He consulted his screen, then tapped at it with a gloved finger.

"Sorry, Mrs Harley..."

She sighed, ignoring the mispronunciation of her name (it seemed like too much to ask).

"There's no provision for that in the fee?" she guessed.

"Er... no," he admitted. Then a thought occurred to him – "You may get one on the second-hand market," he said. "Maybe someone in one of the African States..."

She sighed again. If he didn't see the irony of his suggestion, she was too tired to point it out to him.

She let them sew her up, then douse the wound in anti-viral spray. The patch covered it, held on by a simple strap around her head.

"You can take it off in a week," the surgeon said. He patted her on the shoulder, not unkindly.

Afterwards, they led her back into the waiting room. She sat on a hard plastic chair, numbed by the experience – no longer thinking of her plan... of anything in particular.

Her head didn't hurt, just floated on her neck.

It's the drugs, she thought. The anaesthetic.

"Are you ready?"

It was Mrs Whitten. She stood at the doorway, obviously impatient to get back on the coach.

"I'm ready," Eloise answered.

Something was bothering her, but it had slipped her mind. She gave a mental shrug – it couldn't be important, she thought. No doubt she'd remember what it was, once she was back in her room.

"I can't walk!"

Arnold's voice. It held that anguish she heard every morning.

"They taken my foot!" he called out again.

Mrs Whitten glanced out of the door.

"You're in a wheelchair, Mr Scrivens! Don't worry about the coach! It's got a ramp."

"I can't walk!" he cried again.

Mrs Whitten gave an exasperated gasp, and disappeared out the door.

Eloise was left sitting there, staring at the receptionist.

It was a cheap 412, she recognized again. A nasty model. Stupid.

Now, she thought, the better model's around here somewhere... her gaze drifted around the room.

It focused on the Adjunct's door.

A cold chill gripped her heart. Her stomach flipped, making her gulp back bile.

She'd almost forgotten.

She lurched forward, out of her chair, almost toppling over.

The Adjunct's door seemed to retreat from her as she shuffled across the floor, but – after an age – she grasped the door handle, and pulled it down.

It would not move. It was locked.

Eloise turned to look at the exit, but Mrs Whitten was still coping with Arnold – his cries sounded shrill. The edge of panic in his voice spurred her on – what could she do?

The receptionist.

"Excuse me!" she called out.

The robot's head lifted. It swivelled to face her.

"The Adjunct," Eloise said. "I want to see the Adjunct."

"Do you have an appointment?"

Then she understood.

"Yes," she answered. "Eloise Harvey."

The receptionist reached forward and flipped a toggle on its board.

"Go through, please."

Still dazed by the anaesthetic, but triumphant, Eloise pulled at the door handle. It turned with a click.

In a moment, she was inside.

The Adjunct's office was dark, but there was enough light peeping out through the shuttered window for Eloise to see its shape, silent and collapsed over its desk.

A small object lay in front of it: the Clever Dolly.

Eloise moved to pick it up.

"Ellie!"

She nearly jumped out of her skin.

"Ellie! It's me!"

The small, shrill voice sounded from the doll.

The sound of it threw her back decades, to when she was a little girl. It recalled other things too: the smell of baked bread, the clatter of plates when Grandma would lay the table for the family... she blinked back a tear.

"Ellie!" the voice repeated.

She picked up the doll.

"You did it," she mumbled.

"It's hard for me, now," the doll said. "I've forgotten so much."

She stared at it. Of course. The simplest processor drove its brain now. Its intelligence would be a magnitude less than that of the Adjunct – like the result of a human lobotomy.

"I remember there's a message for you, Ellie," the doll said.

She looked around the room, but there was no clue.

"Where is it?"

"Don't know," the doll said. "When are we going to go on our adventures?"

Eloise sighed.

"I want to go on our adventure," the doll repeated.

She scanned the desk again, but it was empty. Then she noticed that the Adjunct held something in its lifeless hand.

A datapad.

She slipped it out between the cold fingers.

It flickered to life at her touch.

"Hello Eloise," it was the Adjunct's voice, sounding tinny through the small speaker. "This pad holds the travel permit – according to the permit, you're twenty years younger than a moment ago! – but don't worry. No one human will check that on the route I've fed into the ticket. The bus you need to catch is the 81b – it's at the Bus Terminal now. That will take you to Dover where you can take the Channel Link over to France, then cross from there to Greece. The details are on the ticket."

"It was difficult for me to accept removal of the processor, but I accepted your argument; that it's better to live life to the full, even incomplete. Take care of me!"

The pad's RAM light sparked. The message was deleted.

Eloise pocketed the pad and stuffed her Clever Dolly back into her bag.

"What's this?" a muffled voice said.

"Be quiet!" she ordered. "Don't say anything, otherwise we can't go on an adventure!"

"All right! But when can I talk again?"

She remembered, now, how argumentative her doll could be.

"When I tell you," she hissed.

She opened the office door, and peeped outside.

Mrs Whitten was in the reception room, her face white with anger.

"There you are!" she exclaimed. "What were you doing in there? How did you get in?"

Eloise held up her bag. "I was doing my knitting."

Mrs Whitten looked flummoxed at her answer.

"Well!" she said. "They'll be plenty of time for that on the coach. Come on! We're late enough."

Eloise followed Mrs Whitten out through the Clinic doors. She winced from the icy slap of the glacial wind; shuffled along the tarmac as slowly as she could manage, yet without looking like she was deliberately hanging back.

A muffled voice sounded in her bag. She clutched it tight.

"Losing that eye shouldn't have slowed you down," Mrs Whitten said. "I know you didn't use the other one much. Maybe I should have fetched a wheelchair for you, as well as for the others."

Eloise didn't reply. She was concentrating on keeping her feet moving, whilst trying to work out how she could avoid getting back on the coach.

It seemed an impossibility. The bus she hoped to catch was amongst the others she saw, parked over on the other side of the terminal. How could she get there? How could she outrun Mrs Whitten?

Once they were at the coach door, Eloise hesitated to board.

Mrs Whitten had turned towards her, ready to pull her up the steps, when Eloise spotted Arnold sitting in the coach's front seat. His face even paler than usual, and his right leg stuck out in front of him.

It was missing at the knee.

"Arnold!" she called out.

His eyes defocused and he stared down at her, obviously trying to place her face.

"It's me, Arnold!" she said. "How are you?"

"He's fine!" Mrs Whitten interrupted.

"lo Ellie!" It was Betty, banging her hand on the window. She waved her other arm, showing the stump. Despite that, she looked as cheerful as ever.

Resigned to her fate, Eloise began to board the coach.

A shrill cry erupted from her bag.

"What's that?" Arnold said.

Mrs Whitten had heard the sound, too.

"What have you there, dear?" she asked.

She leaned forward to grab the bag, but Eloise drew back.

"No," she said. "You can't take that, too."

Mrs Whitten's lips pursed. She took a step down towards her, tensing to snatch the bag from her hand.

Eloise knew she couldn't resist the younger woman. She gave a whimper.

The sound struck a chord deep within Arnold – something heroic awoke.

"Bitch! Bully! Leave her alone!"

His left leg shot out, slamming into Mrs Whitten, toppling her forward down the coach steps.

She fell in a heap on the tarmac.

Eloise heard a snap, like a chicken bone cracking.

"My leg!" Mrs Whitten screeched. "My leg!"

Eloise stepped back hurriedly, then took her chance. The others were too busy with Mrs Whitten to notice her.

She'd crossed the tarmac by the time she heard their calls. Somehow, she found the wit to dart between the nearest set of buses, then double back – keeping the vehi-

cles between her and the coach until she found the 81b.

It took a moment of fumbling to find the datapad – press its link node against the bus's socket.

The bus door slid open. To her relief, it was a ramp entrance.

After she had settled in her seat, she pulled the Clever Dolly out of her bag to let it look around. It seemed the only way to keep it quiet.

She had a window seat, but she was safe. The bus engine was revving up, ready to take her to Dover, and through the Tunnel. They'd never catch her now – never think to check the borders.

As the bus pulled out of the terminal, she risked a peep out of the window. The Home Carers were still scouring the terminal in puzzlement, wondering how an old woman could disappear so quickly. Mrs Whitten still lay by the bus steps, with a medic stooped over her.

She looked down at Clever Dolly.

"We made it," she whispered. "I don't mind losing my eye for that."

Clever Dolly opened its right eye – the sapphire implant gazed back at her.

"To be human," the doll said, "is to be incomplete."

Nigel Brown's previous stories in *Interzone* were "Under the Overlight" (issue 165) and "Rare as a Rocket" (issue 168).

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PIER PRESSURE

Christina Lake

None of my nine sisters has ever set foot on shore, believing it to be a wild and lawless place. In the summer they lie in deckchairs on the south side of the pier, nibbling at cockles and rubbing sun oil into each other. In the winter, they spend their days in the casino playing bingo and putting obsolete coins into the slot machines.

I doubt they ever give a thought to what I do with my time.

While it was still summer I used to climb down from the pier at low tide using one of the old maintenance ladders and swim or paddle through the shallow waves to the vast plain of mud between myself and the shore. Sometimes I just roamed across the mud, barefoot, feeling it, soft and sludgy, between my toes. Other days I would walk up to the beach to see what had been washed ashore. I was always on the look-out for the empty holes left by the seal-people. These holes fascinated me. I liked to slide into them and imagine myself asleep, buried in sand, waiting for the water to soak through, the moisture to creep into the parched pores of my skin, and the waves to lick away the sand, as gently as a lover's tongue. At these times I could almost feel the waters around me, nudging me, lifting me, floating me, as deep inside a pulse quickened and the oils of my body began to flow.

On the other side of the sea-wall was the esplanade with its abandoned holiday flatlets, its dilapidated kiosks with flapping pennants still advertising ice-cream and its shelters for benches that no longer exist, green paint peeling off from their Victorian ornamental ironwork. I didn't go there often – not because of the dangers of the land, but because it reminded me too much of the pier.

One day I did walk along the concrete pavement of the seafront as far as the old gas-works. I don't know why. It

was early summer, just after I took to roaming the muds, away from my sisters. That day, I remember, my head ached and my throat was dry from swallowing too much sea-water, but I felt I had to go on. The gas-works stood alone, discarded in a patch of wasteland, like a huge rusted crown. I wriggled through the barbed wire and stared up at the container and its gothic superstructure of iron struts and trellises, trying to remember why the place seemed so important to me. Hadn't I been there before? I felt convinced that I had. I walked forward, tentatively, then stopped. In front of me, on the ground, just a few yards away, half-covered in bindweed and nettles, was a body. I looked at it a second, at the cracked brown eyes that stared out, sightless, from a collapsed face of dry bones and weathered cartilage, before turning to run.

For days I could not stop dreaming about that face. I would catch it for a half-second, staring back at me out of the mirror. Only later did I realize that it must have been one of the seal-people, heading back to the sea, caught too late and dried out, there by the gas-works, beneath the merciless sun.

But now it is winter, nearly Christmas, and I prefer to watch the sea from the window of the bedroom that I share with three of my sisters. Fortunately, they are never there in the daytime, preferring the amusements of the Casino to the quiet of their room. They return only in the hour before supper, to do their hair, change their identical dresses and count up each other's winnings, which they record meticulously in a leather-bound log-book.

I have not always been different from my sisters. Once I too soaked in the sun like a hungry vegetable, and marked up my bingo card with the avid strokes of the

gambler. At least so my memory tells me.

I don't know what changed me, just that it happened in an instant. I walked into the Casino, early, alone. It was completely empty. In the echoing silence, the crimson of the carpet and the tarnished gold of the chandeliers were overpowering and garish. Round the walls, the slot machines brooded, unloved, in the pitted metal of their cases. I walked over to the wax model of Popeye the Sailor Man that had once stood at the entrance to the pier. Relegated to a dusty corner, between the mechanical horse-racing track and the crane that still grasped for stale packets of Love Hearts, he chuckled away to himself like a mad old man. Each time he laughed he threw his head back in a caricature of mirth that sent shivers of revulsion down my spine.

I don't know how long I stood there, watching the Popeye laugh, but suddenly, behind me, there were footsteps and voices. I turned round and saw my sisters in their cream pinafore frocks, tripping into the room in twos and threes, giggling among themselves like a group of overgrown school girls. I looked down at my own absurd costume, exactly the same as theirs, and it was then that I realized the full horror of what I had become.

Today it rained and I walked for about a mile down the pier, striding over the wet boards in my galoshes. I passed a couple of fishermen and women huddled under umbrellas, trying to catch some extra fish for the Christmas feast, but saw no one else until I came to the seal-creature. It was stretched out across the line where the pier trains used to run, fully dressed, its skin grey and its hair brown and cracked like dried-out seaweed. I bent down to touch its face. In spite of the rain, the skin felt bone dry and brittle. I wondered if it were dead like the one I had found by the gas-works, but the creature stirred slightly beneath my touch and I felt my hand almost being sucked into its face as it tried to draw moisture from my flesh into its own. I wondered whether to drag it to the railings and tip it into the seas, but it looked heavy, and I had no idea what the sudden shock would do to it. In the end I ran back to the nearest fisherman and made her return with me. She dabbed some of the seawater from her fish bucket on to its face, smoothing it in till a faint moist glow appeared in the powder white surface. Then, between us, we carried the seal-creature back to the Pavilions.

My uncle and his friends were playing their afternoon match of ten-pin bowling. May Tanner, the reigning champion, had her fingers buried deep in a ball and was polishing it on the almost threadbare mohair of her jumper as she took up position, ready to throw. My uncle sat on a bar-stool, frowning over the scorecards, pencil poised to note down the result of May's throw. The only one to pay any attention to us was Nick Bailey who watches me all the time, his gaze wide-eyed and innocent to fool my uncle.

"Look what we have here," said Nick, tapping his cane on the floor to get everyone's attention, then pointing at the seal creature.

May let go of her ball prematurely as they all turned

round to gape. The ball rolled down dead centre of the lane, getting slower and slower till it trickled into the gutter at the side. The skittle at the farthest edge wobbled but did not fall.

"My, my Dorabella, where did you get that?" asked my uncle, his score cards forgotten.

"I'm not Dorabella," I said crossly. "Can't you see it's dying?"

"Nonsense. A spot of sea-water will soon revive it."

"You found it on the pier, I take it," said Nick Bailey, bending down to feel the coat that the seal-creature was wearing, his fingers lingering over the tough fabric that looked as fine as silk. "I wonder how it got past the guards?"

"Climbed along the struts underneath, shouldn't wonder," said my uncle.

"But why?" asked Nick, letting go of the coat with obvious reluctance. "It must have known it needed to go back to the sea."

"Hmm," grunted my uncle. "Half-crazed is my guess. Didn't know *what* it was doing." He smiled at me, displaying stained teeth under a grizzled moustache. "Run along now, Fleur-de-Lys. I expect your sisters will be wanting you for the bingo."

I saw no more of the seal-man all day. At supper Nick Bailey was wearing the creature's frock-coat and both he and my uncle looked exceptionally pleased with themselves. Daphne White, our only musician, played the piano loudly, as she always did, treading heavily on the pedal. A few of the younger men and women gathered behind the piano, placing their elbows on the circle-stained wooden top, their spreading bottoms squashed up against the one-armed bandits, and sang old pop songs. After a time my uncle signalled for them to stop and announced that we sisters would perform. We don't perform very often, but when we do it always goes the same way: my nine sisters know precisely what we will sing, just as they know precisely which set of matching dresses we will all wear after bath night, and I trail along a bar or two behind, discordant to the last.

This time we sang something sisterly from *The Sound of Music*.

"Perfect," said my uncle when we had finished. "No, stay there a second, my beauties. Look at them," he said, gesturing to everyone round the table. "Don't you agree that our programme is a success? For two years now they have lived among us, the spitting images of my own dear departed wife and as identical as ten peas in a pod. Are they not a credit to our science and our pier?" There were claps and whistles of agreement. One or two did sneak a glance at me, but they looked away quickly, not wishing to annoy my uncle.

My uncle expanded his stomach with pride under the red worsted of his waistcoat. "So the time has come to send them out, as agreed, to be our ambassadors to the other piers of the realm. At our Christmas dinner we shall draw lots, and nine will leave here to be our representatives in the outside world, and one shall stay behind to be wife to Nick, my heir."

Cheers resounded round the casino and Daphne played a highly inventive version of the wedding march.

After my uncle's announcement, Constanze called an emergency meeting in our bedroom. I stood in the doorway, neither included nor excluded.

"How can *she* go out as one of the ambassadors when *she* doesn't think the same as us?" Constanze said.

"And how can the links between the ten piers be kept the same with *her* in charge of one of them?" added Sandrina.

"But there has to be ten of us," said Dorabella.

"Our uncle should have recloned her when we asked," said Fleur-de-Lys.

"But there's no time," said Elisa.

I left while they were still speaking and went to look for the seal-man. The fishermen and boatmen sleep in floating shacks built on to the end of the pier next to the desalination unit, but the rest of us have rooms in the Pavilion. My uncle's room is at the very top, and is crowned with a glass dome, through which he trains his telescope on the surrounding seas, looking out for enemies. I was sure that the seal-man would be in there. I crept up the stairs, listening carefully for any noises from above. At the top of the stairs I pressed my face up against the opaque glass porthole in the door, checking for the tell-tale glow of light that would mean my uncle was there. I could see nothing, so I pushed the door open. In the faint light from the moon I could just make out the shape of a tin bath tub next to the bed, and inside it the seal-man. I crossed the room and knelt next to him, listening. I put my hand on his face: it was moist and alive. Then I moved my hand across to his hair and felt it fall, soft and slightly clammy between my fingers.

"Quinn," he spoke. "Is that you?"

I jerked my hand away.

"I thought I would have lungs," he murmured. "I thought I could stay as long as I liked."

His eyelids flickered open. The eyes shone phosphorescent green in the moonlight for a moment, before they closed again.

"You said we could live on the land here." His voice was no more than a whisper, and suddenly it came to me that he was speaking in a foreign tongue. All the syllables, all the sounds were different from those I used in everyday speech. And yet, I understood it. "Not for long, you said. But you never told me that it would be like this." He reached out and felt for my hand. His fingers were cold and as they folded over mine I felt the membrane between them rubbery like jelly left out too long in a bowl. "Quinn," he said. "I nearly died."

The lights snapped on, bright and stabbing. The hand in mine went limp, then oozed out of my grasp. I looked up, blinking in the glare. Nick Bailey stood in the doorway.

"I thought I'd find you here." He eyed me intently. The lines and wrinkles of his normally boyish-looking face stood picked-out, exposed in the too-bright light of my uncle's room.

He came over to me and tapped his cane familiarly

against my bottom. "Don't worry about him, he'll be all right," he said. "Let's talk about the lottery. It's you I'm going to win. You might as well get used to it, because your uncle will never let you go."

I stood up and kicked the cane aside, viciously, grazing his leg as I did so. "I'm the corrupt copy," I said. "Why keep me?"

"Precisely," Nick gloated. "The other piers will think you're exactly the same as your sisters. But you're not. And that way we will fool them."

"We will fool no one, because my sisters hate me."

I sidestepped Nick and walked out of the room.

"They will remain loyal," he said, his voice confident behind me.

At the bottom of the stairs, I put my hand up to my face, the one that the seal-man had held in his. It smelt, very faintly, of sardines.

I did not see the seal-man again till Saturday night. My uncle must have moved him for he was not in his room when next I looked. And I could not find him anywhere else in the Pavilion.

On Christmas night my sisters, in high excitement, made me dress in white lace and we went down to supper together. The seal-man was sitting between my uncle and Nick Bailey. He was wearing one of my uncle's shirts which was too big for him, and his long straight hair was pulled back from his eyes with a piece of elastic. His face shone with a black oily glow and his hair had a greenish tinge to its brown. When the ten of us were seated he lifted his head to look at us. He scanned across our faces beneath heavy eyelids, resting his strange eyes on me a moment longer than the others, before looking back down at his plate again.

He was served the same food as the rest of us, but he ate none of it. At last, after the plum pudding, my uncle stood up.

"You all know that this is an important night for us," he said. "But you didn't know it was so important that the seal-people would send us a delegate for the occasion." He chuckled happily. "Well, you'll hear more from him later."

Some of those assembled clapped, but others, notably the fishermen and boatmen, whispered amongst themselves and exchanged disapproving glances.

"And now for the lottery," announced my uncle proudly.

Marsha Leytonstone, the bingo caller, dressed in her best cardigan, a shapeless garment knitted from yellow wool many years ago, stood up and walked to the podium. Daphne White in her usual puce dress and peeling plastic stilettos tottered towards the piano. Daphne played a couple of carols while Marsha placed the names of the piers in one box and the names of us sisters in the other. A reverential hush fell over the gathering.

Marsha drew the first piece of paper.

"Weston-super-Mare," she declared, with great portentousness.

The lottery results provoked mixed reactions from my sisters. Fleur-de-Lys was happy with Clacton, while Dorabella accepted Deal with stoicism and Elisa preened

herself over Brighton: "They have two piers there, you know," she could be heard to say above Constanze's wails of "Wigan! Not Wigan! I can't bear it!"

But they all forgot their individual fates and turned on my uncle with cries of outrage when they heard it was to be I who stayed.

"Please, you can't do this to us!" begged Elvira.

"Who will we talk to on our statutory return visits of thirteen days a year?" protested Constanze.

"It'll be like never seeing each other again," bemoaned Rosina.

"Quiet, all of you," said my uncle, his face quite red. "The lottery has spoken."

Nick Bailey leered at me. "And now, let our friend from the seal-people say his piece."

The seal-man stood up. He swayed a bit, but steadied himself against the table. He kept his hands with the webbed fingers behind his back.

"It is true that I am one of those you call the seal-people," he said, "but we are not as you think us. We are not your enemies. We are not from your world at all."

Nick Bailey's fine fair eyebrows rose in surprise, but my uncle beamed with pleasure.

"Where are you from then?" he barked. "Speak up, lad."

"We are from..." he frowned, "somewhere else. Somewhere where the sands are deep and never dry out." I could tell he was having trouble with the words. He pronounced them correctly, but as if he had never used them before in his life.

"Well, that's nice," said my uncle. "Very nice. If you like that sort of thing."

"But I did not come here to tell you about my people. I came to find my friend, who was lost on your shore and now is one..." He stopped mid-phrase, hiccupped and slithered back into his seat. Nick Bailey withdrew his cane and smiled. "Thank you, my friend, the seal-man. Now let's have a toast." He looked at me again. "To Susannah. My bride to be."

The seal-man was grunting in pain, his webbed fingers writhing on the table-top.

"My name isn't Susannah," I said, staring at the seal-creature, willing those phosphorescent green eyes to look back at me. "It's Quinn."

"Don't talk nonsense, child," said my uncle.

The movement of the seal-man's fingers gradually stopped, and he forced his head up. There was black oil oozing from his lips, but still he managed a smile. "Then we can go home," he said in that other language he had used before.

"Yes," I agreed.

In the far corner, the wax model of Popeye threw back its head and began to laugh, like a maniac.

Christina Lake's previous stories in *Interzone* were "Assyria" (issue 19) and "The Greening of the Slag Heaps" (issue 88).

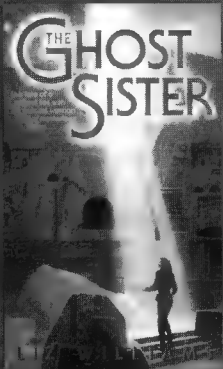
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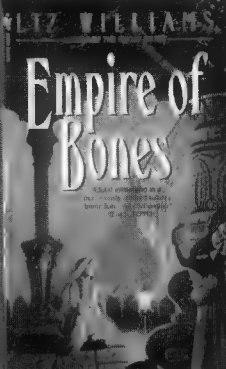
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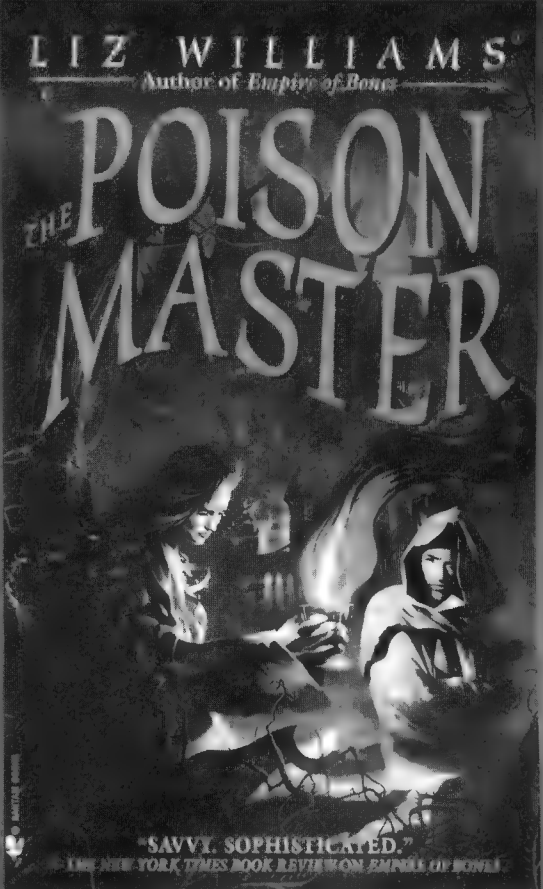
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FLIGHTS

Daniel Kaysen

1. Winter

The take-home message of the Nativity story is that you should never try to move house around Christmas. Not without an understanding spouse at your side, or a kindly inn-keeper, or at the very least a donkey.

I had none of the above.

My lover had upped and gone in early December, citing the need for more *space* and in turn leaving me longing for less of it.

I knew no inn-keepers. All the pubs I drank in had the same smooth managers, collared and tied and bland. I doubted they had stables available for short-term let.

And there are no donkeys on the city's beaches now, no slow hooves on pebbles, no patient ears, not anymore.

I had to go it alone.

But you should never try to move house around Christmas. Everyone knows that.

Still. I did my best to find a room.

I rang the phone numbers that I found in the local paper or that were passed on from friends of friends on the rental telegraph. But I was always told that the room had *gone*, as if it were a dove, flown.

Every other room-hunter was getting there before me.

So I hit the internet, which is the best place to find information that is hidden and lonely and unseen.

Welcome, said the nineteenth link I tried, to *The Flat-share Finder!* The intro page showed carefree young models, with white teeth and tossed hair, laughing round a kitchen table.

Someone had spent too much money on the look and feel of the site, justifying the expense on the basis of the projected tens of thousands that would shortly be typing in the details of their rooms to rent.

A dispiriting one person had registered in my area.

But, still, I clicked again.

The listing included photos of the flat and my would-be room, which both looked nice, and the potential sharer. Who looked fine. But not female.

I was F seeking F, ideally, but what the hell.

I hit reply and sent him my mobile number.

He phoned me. The room hadn't gone. I managed not to drop the phone.

We chatted.

We swapped our virtues.

He was Richard and didn't run raves in the flat. I was Lisa and didn't keep pets. Neither of us had children or allergies.

We neither of us smoked and neither of us drank, other than socially.

He had a voice I warmed to.

"The room sounds like the last nice one in the city," I said. "Can I come and see?"

"Sure. But there's one thing that's a bit..."

My heart did its well-practised swan-dive. I'd seen so many nice-on-paper places turn ugly and unliveable on previous flat hunts that I wasn't surprised by news that there was a catch.

"What is it?" I said.

"It's... it's not a *bad* thing," he said, "but most people can't handle it. You might, though," he said hopefully.

Like a small arachnophile boy, hoping you'll be the one to make friends with his collection.

I don't know why I thought that.

"Is it spiders?" I said.

"What? No, of course not. Look, just come round this evening. See for yourself."

At least it wasn't spiders, I told myself.

At least it wasn't that.

That evening he let me in and showed me into the lounge – clean, tidy, spacious, newly painted – and sat me on the sofa with a nice glass of red.

I looked round for the weird stuff.
There was a Jackson Pollock on the wall. Fine.
There was a Rothko on another wall. Also fine.
There were books on the shelves, thick heavy books.
“Maths,” he said, when I asked. “Computing. Electrical engineering. It’s what I do.”
Ah.

But needs must. We looked at each other. I saw an ordinary cute-looking guy – if he was a flat you would call him well-presented, a good size. All amenities.

Estate agents don’t often call their flats “welcoming” but he was.

He showed me my room, which was even nicer than the photos of it.

So what was the bad thing?

As we came back through to the lounge I paid attention to the music for the first time. It was a bit like Michael Nyman, a bit like Philip Glass, a melody that ran up and down in a pattern that changed and never quite repeated.

“What’s the music? I like it.”

“The music’s the bad thing.”

“What, *this*?” He obviously had never lived with a techno addict. “Why’s this the bad thing?”

He told me.

“Say what?” said Emma, my best friend, the next night down the pub.

I was trying to explain about my new flat and why it was so great.

I’d told her about the low rent and the space and light and the general wonder of it, so she’d asked what the catch was. I’d told her there was no catch, apart from the music, which wasn’t really a catch at all. More of a quirk than a catch, I’d said.

And when she’d frowned at that I’d taken a deep breath and explained.

First up, she had to know that Richard was playing the stock market, trying to predict when the next big crash, or rise, was coming, and –

There followed a brief diversion into Emma’s experience with a stockbroker, one night in Tooting.

With the stockbroker behind us I explained that Richard’s computer monitored the second by second rise and fall of the market, and turned each rise and fall into a different musical note.

The music I’d heard wasn’t Nyman or Glass. It was the Dow Jones Industrial Average.

“Right,” said Emma, trying to be positive but clearly uncomfortable at the whole idea of listening to economics.

I tried to explain how it was exciting – like a little glimpse into synaesthesia and –

We had a brief diversion into Emma’s flirtation with a psychology doctoral student, who was big on synaesthesia and when drunk tried to work out what the synaesthetic version of phone sex would be.

I ploughed on, quickly. I explained how the stock market’s price changes were apparently a special kind of randomness, fractal randomness, and that imminent large changes produced a subtle change in the underlying pat-

tern. The human ear registers the change better than the human eye does.

The eye gets swamped with numbers. The ear hears the truth, underneath.

“So then what happens?”

“Then Richard phones his broker. Bingo. In theory.”

“Oh,” she said. She leaned forward. “So...”

I knew what was coming.

“So are you shagging him, or what?”

It was her fundamental question. It deserved its own acronym: SAYSHOW.

“Or what,” I said. “I think he bats for the other team.”

Emma nodded, trusting my judgement.

We had a brief diversion about a gay man Emma had slept with in her gap year.

“Tell me something crap about your flat,” said Emma.

“I hate it already.”

She was shackled up in a draughty and rather nasty converted attic with a boyfriend she knew I didn’t trust, but whose sexual technique was irresistible. Besides, she couldn’t leave in case he was The One. Emma and her dilemma occupied many hours of our time.

I thought of the one catch about the flat. “It’s not very close to the buses,” I said.

“So?” said Richard.

“Yes, I’ll take it,” I said. “Music and all.”

“Good,” he said. “Welcome.” He put out his hand and we shook, chastely. “Happy Christmas,” he said.

Emma’s phone went. It was her boyfriend. She smiled, and then began to gnaw her lip, then ran outside.

By the look on her face when she returned I knew he was now her ex-boyfriend.

“He said he loved me *but*...” she said.

The *but* was called Fiona.

We got diverted.

It was a good year, my year in that flat.

My heart knitted together slowly, like bone mending.

Emma spent the year getting over her ex, then getting under a rebound lover, then getting over him in turn when there turned out to be a *but* and her name was Sophie. It was Emma’s curse. There was always someone else. Each time she swore she’d broken the pattern, but the pattern kept on creeping up and biting her all over again.

Richard didn’t have such turmoil in his love life. As far as I could tell he had no love life to have turmoil in. I quietly went about my flatshare assuming he was gay but not asking.

He probably thought I was too. My love life, after all, was like his. Nada, nothing. No one.

“Where’s the life-changing passion in my life?” I asked Richard, one night when we’d had too much of the nice red. We were up past the Dow Jones’s bedtime so we were listening to the Tokyo prices.

“Ah,” he said wisely, “but where’s the life-destroying crashes?” he said.

Emma had both. Ups way high, downs way low.

I had neither.

Who was the better off?

Emma found The One, and moved in with him.

Our one year anniversary as flatsharers approached.

"Christmas," Richard smiled, enigmatically pleased.

Drunk, too. It was late. We were listening to Tokyo again.

"We should do something different. What – or who – do you fancy?"

It wasn't said lightly. It was one of those sudden overloaded questions that threaten to topple over into something delicate and uninsured and smash it.

We looked at each other in the silence.

We'd had way too much of the nice red.

We went to bed, separately.

Emma's One didn't have a *but*, but he did have a Past, and it all came out two nights before Christmas.

"He's got a police record," she said on the phone, from the street outside her flat. "I'm scared."

It was night, and late, so I said she could sleep at mine.

We ended up playing trivial pursuit, the three of us.

The game degenerated when Richard swore he'd given the correct answer even though it differed – by a single but vital letter – from that given on the back of the card. It was a computing question and I trusted he was right, but Emma was insistent. "What's on the cards is the answer!" She couldn't understand a world where realities diverged. Richard couldn't believe a world where misprints ruled.

We called it a draw and decided to phone for pizza, and to lighten the post-dispute atmosphere I chose mine at random, sticking a pin in the menu, leaving it to God.

God sent me anchovies, which was a lesson learned.

Solicitous messages were sent to me through the bathroom door as I threw up.

Emma preferred the sofa-bed in the lounge to the threat of me vomiting next to her.

She'd always been the hardcore party girl who could, after three hours sleep, after having drunk a silly amount the night before, still be up and out the door in eight minutes. So I wasn't surprised she was gone in the morning, the sofa-bed neatly folded back into place.

I wasn't sorry, either.

It was Christmas Eve and roughly our flat share anniversary, and I was looking forward to a companionable, celebratory day with Richard.

I showered and dressed.

I thought I'd be extra specially angelic and take Richard coffee. I liked the feel of my imaginary halo as I knocked and went into his room.

It was dark and it took a moment for my eyes to adjust.

"Oh," I said, uselessly, when I saw.

Two faces looked up at me from bed.

There was one of those silences.

"I can be up and out in eight minutes," said Emma.

"Don't bother," I told her, told them.

I was out of the flat in five seconds.

God knows why I went where I went.

Perhaps I thought they'd never find me there. Or perhaps I thought that they would. Not that it was the first place I'd look for a missing flatmate. But it was comfy, not physically, but emotionally.

I sat for hours and watched the buses, in the city centre, keeping warm with coffee from Starbucks and the cigarettes I gave up long ago.

I know, I know, I should have gone and sat by the sea, but sometimes the sea is too big, too inevitable. I like the smaller horizon, the tiny details, of buses.

The fare you can pay with a single coin, the little tickets. The small button you press for the bell.

I love the this-happens, that-happens directness of it all. You press the button, the bell goes, the bus stops.

Life should have a bell, I think, for complex times when you want to get off the journey and just stand for a while by the edge of the road, watching and not going anywhere.

I was ill as a child once, a weird kind of ill. I had a fever but I didn't feel *bad*, I just felt woozy, and things looked wrong, odd, new.

That illness started suddenly in the centre of town and my mother carried me on to the bus in her arms. As we passed the bus's engine I patted it. For a second I mixed buses up with horses.

I could feel it breathing. "Good bus," I said, patting it. "Good bus."

When I went to see *The Horse Whisperer* at the cinema I remembered me and the bus that day.

There was a minute, when I was little, when I was the Bus Whisperer.

My life would have been better like that.

I could have been Lisa, the Bus Whisperer, and been on call: summonsed at short notice to whisper and comfort a 49, broken-down on the Woodingdean loop.

Or sent to tame a wild 5B that insisted on taking the rightward fork at St Peters Church, heading East instead of North.

I would have led it into a field and let it run off its diesel. I would have calmly watched it circle closer, gaining trust in me.

I could have had weatherbeaten eyes of piercing blue, like Robert Redford in the movie, and free travel within the city limits.

That's how it should have been.

2. Summer

I was happy for them, mostly, at their summer wedding.

She got to wear white, and blush. He got the organist to play his favourite piece of Philip Glass.

The photographer was cheerful, and he did not notice as his hair matted in the sun.

The reception smelled of suits and spilled champagne and bad cover-versions.

So Richard's brother kissed me.

"So?" said Emma, back and tanned from the honeymoon.

"No, I am not shagging his brother. Not remotely."

"You sure?"

"For god's sake, woman." That was Richard.
I left to them their first tiff.

I struggled for a bit.

I found myself humming snatches of Tokyo, mournfully.

The lease on the dive I had rented short-term was due to run out and I pondered the possible benefits of living in caravans.

I drank too much, socially or alone, and smoked too much.

My mother left a message wondering if I was having a breakdown.

I wondered the same thing.

Then I found a little one bed flat, above the bus station. No one else wanted it.

I turned a corner.

Life is different, then.

I sleep through the engines starting. I wake at the faintest cough from a driver.

I like that, getting to watch the buses leave the ranch in the morning, and watching them coming back at the end of the day, from their long trek. They get fed and hosed down, hooves examined, stones carefully removed.

They go in the morning, they return at night.

They are robust and flexible. They canter round accidents. They are patient at traffic lights.

Their lives are parallel to ours.

I smell faintly of diesel, Emma tells me.

I tell her she smells faintly of sex.

"Same thing," says Emma. "Sort of."

Then we see less of each other.

We drift apart as autumn arrives. It is not unexpected.

We must meet up at Christmas, we tell each other, but we do not. Not in December, not in the months after.

The bus timetables change for spring.

The drivers look more cheerful in the morning.

Tourists struggle with the currency.

An invitation comes.

It is their first wedding anniversary, one year on. It was meant to be a celebratory gathering, a recreation of the wedding, or at least a translation of it, but the Best Man can't come, and the parents are on long-booked summer holidays, and the bridesmaids plead prior commitments even though they are eight and ten. I am the only one free.

Having told each other with decreasing frequency how much we must meet up, this invitation is a now or never kind of date. If I don't turn up to their anniversary I may never see them again.

I go, for old times' sake.

We sit in the beer-garden's heat.

Emma is different. She is drinking orange juice, indulgently. She says she is telling nobody she is pregnant, because it's not definite yet.

Richard has better hair and an electronic organiser, its screen blank.

I ask him how he is.

He tells me a city bank is interested in his stock market music. But not for prediction. They want to use it in

the lifts.

I look at Emma. She is smiling, distant. Thinking of other things. Baby clothes from Gap, first Christmases. Names, dresses, labour.

I realize I have never seen her quiet, before.

"And you?" Richard says.

But I need to go. I have had too much of being sociable.

I tell them I'll phone. They say the same.

We must keep in touch.

"Where you going?" says Richard. "I could give you a lift?"

No. I leave them to it.

I take the righthand fork, Eastward, wayward.

For the rest of their wedding anniversary I sit at Stop J. Coffee. Cigarettes. One year on.

I watch a bus as it rests for a minute, flanks heaving. A motorbike barks, weaving in and out between the legs of the traffic. A Vauxhall coyote nips at its heels. The police helicopter is up, fine eyesight looking down for small prey as they scuttle between boulders.

So many animals.

Something, some pattern, some angel, some meaning circles me, sniffing, engine rumbling.

But it is all just out of reach.

My eyes are almost weatherbeaten, almost blue, but not quite there.

3. Winter

That autumn life makes an illegal U-turn.

I am back in the flat, the one with the memories. It is my third Christmas there.

"Presents," says Emma from the other room.

"What about them?" I reply, in the lounge.

"What do you want?"

It was good timing, for me. I needed a place. They are knocking down the bus station and my flat with it. They need it for a car park.

"I want to go to church," I tell her.

"Oh."

St Peter's church is the one with multiple bus stops, in all possible directions.

It is where you can hear the singing of hymns if you're outside waiting for the bus, or you can hear the buses if you're inside singing.

There is no good coffee nearby, so I just sit, in a bus-shelter outside the church, as the dusk falls.

Sitting next to me is a man with a battered notebook and five days stubble. He looks somewhere between 25 and 50.

"Hi," I say.

Richard doesn't have a computer anymore, but he says he doesn't miss it.

Instead, Richard reads old newspapers from the recycling bin.

"Yes?" I say. Wondering how I'm going to explain this to Emma.

"I bet on the horses," he says.

There are several betting shops within 400 yards of St Peter's church.

"You do?" I say.

"Mmm," he says.

"And does it work?"

"Mmm," he says.

He reaches into a grubby pocket. He pulls out a roll of notes. Twenties, a vast number of them.

"You're richer than you look," I say.

"It's not just horses."

I hold my breath, waiting for him to say he deals to the clients at the needle exchange across the road.

A 712 bus pulls up, in its dappled blue. It is early, ahead of time, and the driver turns its engine off. Poor tired workhorse. Not a galloper, not now. I want to go and touch it, but am trying to train myself out of that one, with the encouragement of my doctor and pills. They are trying me on a promising new medication for my condition. They tell me I am in a clinical trial.

I like the outlaw connotations of that phrase. As if I was a fugitive from justice. As if the jury eye me, thrilled and suspicious.

"It's horses and airplanes," he says.

"You bet on airplanes?"

"I spot them, from here. I learned the timetable."

He indicates his reporter's notebooks filled with dense and tiny writing.

"Hard to spot planes from the ground when it's cloudy," I say, "or when they're delayed because it's raining in Madrid."

"Precisely," he says, pleased.

He knows which horses like what sort of ground. And he knows the meteorological meaning of planes that can be seen, or that can't because of cloud, or that are late because of delays elsewhere.

"If X is correlated with Z and Y is correlated with Z then there is a relationship between X and Y."

I think of maths classes and chalk and wanting to be too old for school.

"Horses are X," he says. "Planes are Y."

I'm scared he's going to ask me to take away the number I first thought of.

"The weather is Z."

I think: the weather is very Z for the time of year.

"It's not a bad living," he says.

"And apart from all this, how are you?" I say.

He ponders my question, trying to work out what there is apart from all this.

He lifts his eyes upwards.

"Gatwick to Paris, a little late," he says, making a tiny note. "And yourself?"

The 712 is still sitting there, waiting for me. I have to sit on my hands to stop myself from going over to it.

"Up and down," I say.

Inside the church they start singing the first hymn.

The 712 starts its engine.

"Here, I've got a present for you," says Richard. "Happy Christmas." He hands it to me.

It is a newspaper clipping. THREE DEAD IN HOUSEFIRE, says the headline.

Ah, I think.

It has happened. Richard has crossed over, gone too far, flown too high. I am unnerved, but I hope I do not show it. "Thank you," I say, with dignity.

I have no present for him. It did not occur to me that I would need one. So I improvise. I solemnly give him a till receipt from Boots. "Happy Christmas, in return," I say. It has numbers on, information. I hope he likes it.

His eyebrows rise, interested, surprised. "You can tell a lot from these. If you wanted to play the economy you'd save all your till receipts and compare the times on them. You could measure consumer confidence," he says. "Retail efficiency. Queuing times," he says. He looks at me. "Thank you," he says, politely.

His cheek is stubbly as a hairbrush as I kiss it. I wave and go to the other bus stop, the one that takes me home.

I leave him looking at the skies.

"Say what?" says Emma.

"This was his Christmas present to me."

She looks at the newspaper clipping.

I can rely on her to not get subtexts, not to be worried by the three dead, the house fire, the metaphor of it all.

She's a binary girl, is Emma.

Instead she simply turns the newspaper clipping over, to read the other side.

On the other side of the clipping is the photo of the wedding group the local paper ran.

The housefire is an accident. The photo is what is intended.

Richard has circled our three faces and joined them up with lines. He has seen what I didn't see at the time. Our smiles are our best. Most smiles are generic, washed out by posing and by being watched, but these are personal, these are the heart of us.

He has assigned us letters, I notice. Emma doesn't.

"Bless," she says, pleased. "And he's okay?"

I want to ask her in whose world she's asking. In her world no, he's not okay. In his world yes, he's better than ever. In my world – but I'm not sure what my world is, anymore.

"He's doing well," I say, "financially."

"Good," she said. She pauses, Richard belongs to other times of year and she wants to keep Christmas alight. "Right. Carols."

She puts on the old record her Dad always played when she was little.

I gave Richard a till receipt for Christmas, I think with mild horror.

God rest ye merry gentlemen starts.

No one understands the words, I think. Emma doesn't, singing along. She thinks that merry belongs with gentlemen. She lives in a world of merry gentlemen in need of rest, like living in a world of tooth-combs, some of which are fine. It is not the right world. There should be a comma there. *God rest ye merry, gentlemen.*

But she doesn't hear the comma, she doesn't hear the message that God might keep her happy. To her it's more about a nice long sleep.

She likes her sleep, now, does Emma. She can be up and

out of bed in ninety minutes.

She has found someone.

Finally.

4. Summer

"Hi," I say, opening the door, one evening in July.

"Hi," the stranger says.

She is Elizabeth. The internet has sent her. She is F seeking F.

She said on the phone she was flight crew, at Gatwick, and indeed here she is in her uniform.

"I'm away a lot, does that bother you?" she asks.

"No," I say, remembering how sometimes I used to long to be on my own. I smile. "I'll give you the tour."

Her room is the one that was originally Richard's, then Emma's.

She walks in and admires it.

"Nice."

We go back to the lounge. I look at the room through her eyes and am relieved, there is nothing worrying to see here.

I have become a single professional, a slice of demography. I get up in the morning, I catch the train, I do my job from nine to five, I take my pills. On weekends I clean and watch TV and socialize.

There is a folder of work on the coffee table. There are work shoes at the bottom of my wardrobe. Sensible, smart.

I see the correlations that other people see. Good job, smart shoes. Financial security, long-booked holidays.

Buses, diesel, imperil all those things. I see that now.

"Is there a catch?" Elizabeth asks, looking round the lounge, sensing there must be one – there is always a catch, every flat hunter knows that.

She looks idly at the mantelpiece.

On it there are two photos.

The first is a photo of Emma with Him – she does not call him The One, but they have been going out a long while now, by Emma-time standards. She took ages to move in with him, and is proud of herself for that. She has played scrabble with his parents, she has met his significant exes. There will be no *buts*, Emma says. She and Him are taking it slowly. There are no wild highs. In the photo they smile, mildly sunblessed, on holiday. Comfortable.

The other photo is of Richard. He is wearing a collared shirt and loosened tie, holding a Budweiser. It is the perfect photo of someone looking jokey at an office night out. He has a job, now.

Things changed for him when two independent opinions declared that the alleged correlation between airplanes and horse-racing results was enough to qualify him for treatment. So, he got treated.

There is no pattern, underneath, for him, now.

In the mornings he gets an earlier train than mine, but when he is late, or when I am early, we sometimes end up in the same carriage. We wave at each other. If our seats are close enough to talk we exchange news. Jobs. Holidays. The usual stuff.

"He looks happy," says Elizabeth.

"So are Ladbrokes," I say. "And William Hills."

"Who?"

"They're bookmakers."

She shakes her head, not understanding.

"Anyway," she says, "any catches?"

I look at the photos. Emma is smiling with Him, Richard is looking jokey at the office party.

Are there catches?

I have my suspicions. But there are none that I can voice.

"No," I say. No catches. "How about you?" I ask her.

"Any catches with you?"

Potential sharers that sound good on the phone often arrive laden with snares, I have come to discover.

I expect her to say: I am fervently evangelical and will be having house group here every Tuesday and Thursday, so I hope you speak in tongues.

I expect her to say: I'll need help with my more intimate piercings.

I expect her to say: Is there room for my drum kit?

Instead she says: "Drugs."

She is looking out of the lounge window, at the night-time view of the city. In the middle-distance are two sets of blue flashing lights. It is the police, stationary. One set of lights is on the main road in from London, the other set of lights is at the station.

"Sorry?" I say. "Drugs?"

"When there's lights both at the station and on the main road it means there's a drug cordon round the town."

"Right," I say.

The police are trying to keep the worst of the tide of drugs from reaching the town. I think of children manically piling sand on the beach, though their bright-pink spades are small and it is home-time soon and the tide has many hours till it is high.

I have seen the cordon in action at the station.

There are many police, and several dog handlers, standing on the concourse. It is the dog handlers' decision who gets sniffed by the dogs, but the handlers' choices seem strange, like they've spent too long with their charges and have lost their street-sense for humans. The shifty looking young men in baseball caps go ignored. Perhaps all the town's shifty looking young men in baseball caps are undercover police.

"Sometimes they choose me," Elizabeth says.

She does not look like a drug mule, to my eyes.

But that, I guess, is the point of mules. You do not know what they look like.

"And do they find anything?" I say.

"Never," she says.

I do not ask her whether that means she is too good for them, or whether she is not in that line of work in the first place.

"Strange to put a cordon round a town, to police reality," I say.

"To police it with dogs is stranger," she says.

It is that comment that makes me think I should say no to her. I could tell her the room has *gone*. I should find someone who'll just speak in tongues – or play drums, or pierce uncomfortable places in front of me – but will otherwise not change my world. I should say goodbye to her. I have sensible shoes. I have a holiday long-booked. I

should say no.

Instead I put out my hand.

"Welcome," I say, warmly.

"Could be fun, here," she says, as we shake hands. She has a nice touch.

Her smile reminds me of a person, not a photo.

"Fun," I say. The word creaks when I say it, a piece of foreign vocabulary that has rusted.

A bus goes past the bottom of the road, grumbling something to itself. There is a new bus route, now, round the corner. The flat is close to the buses, after all.

Elizabeth goes, then, after we have arranged her moving-in date.

"I have a flight to catch," she says. "Australia."

It's a winter morning, in Australia, now, I tell myself.

It's a warm summer evening, here.

I always want someone to comfort me and tell me such clashes are alright.

But the door closes behind her and I am alone.

I do not like the abruptness of the silence.

I ring Em, for the first time in months.

She picks up, eventually. She doesn't want to come down the pub, even though she agrees that we haven't spoken properly to each other in ages. She says she thinks she'd prefer a night in, on the sofa.

I tell her she used to be a hardcore party girl.

"So did you," she says. "Well, you know, softcore, whatever."

"C'mon Em, I've got gossip."

"Really?" All the gossip used to be hers.

"Or at least a new flatmate."

She is silent. I can understand why.

All her instincts tell her life will be smoother now if she stays in, watching TV with Him. Nothing will be disturbed, nothing will growl at her, there will be no underneath to bite her. Her current life, her current future, is smoothed perfect and flat, iced, like a wedding cake.

"She's cabin crew," I say. "My flatmate."

There is a longer silence, long enough that I wonder if she is gone. But she is just thinking. She makes a decision.

She starts a brief diversion about a stewardess that she slept with, on the night before graduation.

"Tell me down the pub," I say.

I phone Richard, and he comes too. His collar is loosened. His Budweiser goes too quickly.

I ask him if he has any schemes, like the old days.

"No," he says, staring into the distance. "No, I don't."

He gets another round.

Emma tells her stewardess story.

Which deserves another round, we all think.

At the bar I pick up a flyer for a club. I used to be a party girl, a time ago.

I tell Em and Richard I'm going clubbing, after the pub. They're welcome to come too.

Richard puts a pound into the quiz machine while waiting to be served. We cluster round it.

The angels are on our side. We dredge up hunches and guesses and things we'd thought we had long forgotten, and they all turn out to be correct.

We get to the stage of needing just one more correct

answer to win the jackpot and pay for all our drinks, and more.

"If it's a Sport question, we're screwed," says Emma.

"Or Geography," I say.

But when it comes it is General Knowledge.

I think of hapless queens, or battles, or foreign currencies.

Instead the machine asks us, momentarily, who Farren married in an obscure soap.

Emma, ecstatic, knows the answer: "She married *Joe*!"

We hold our breath as the three possible answers are revealed onscreen:

Tony, Rocky, Decker.

Emma is always to be trusted on soaps, however obscure.

Tony, Rocky, Decker. No Joe.

Something has gone wrong.

A little clock in the corner of the screen counts down our time, as Emma tells us the marital histories and near-misses of everybody named in both question and answer.

"Perhaps they mean *Becky*," Em says. "Not Farren. Becky married Rocky. So press B."

"Or perhaps they mean *Joe*, not Tony, in the answer," says Richard. "So press A."

They both look at me, to adjudicate, to choose.

The clock tells us we have 10 seconds, and helpfully starts to flash an unsoothing shade of red.

"Farren and Becky were twins!" says Emma. Twins are easily confused, perhaps, by the person designing the machine.

"Joe and Tony *sound* similar," says Richard. Equally easily confused.

"Five seconds!!!" shouts Em.

The world contracts.

Five seconds.

"Em, who did Farren *nearly* marry?" I ask.

"Decker, but the limo was hijacked and –"

I jam my finger on C for Decker.

We win a lot of money.

Em dances between the need to celebrate and outrage that the right answer was wrong.

We sit back down and divide our loot on the table, like highwaypeople.

Richard has got his look again.

"See," Richard says, philosophical, "there's general knowledge and there's General Knowledge, and they're on different planes."

I think of stewardesses, though that's not the planes he means.

"To find the distance between the two planes you quantify the amount by which Farren and Decker *nearly* got married, in both space and time," he says. "It's a 3-value vector."

"Farren and Joe were perfect for each other," says Emma. "Their wedding was so sweet..."

"With six of those vectors you can work out where the two planes intersect –"

"...apart from the love-child thing..."

No one's life is easy in a soap

– and they intersect where general knowledge and

General Knowledge are the same – ”

“...and apart from the brain disease...”

I think of big hair and hospital beds and bad editing.

“Actually, with a few data points from *real* weddings that didn’t happen – ”

“In fact, she should have married Decker, really.”

I have never been to a wedding where someone hasn’t told me I’ll be next, as if a big hat and a buffet makes clairvoyants of us all.

“– you could work out where fiction and reality intersect.”

“Or Decker’s sister, she should have gone out with *her*.”

“Unless there’s no difference between the two, of course,” he said. “In which case, you couldn’t.”

“Still, we won,” she says, raising a glass.

“Or if they’re parallel,” he says.

We finish our drinks, the last before it is time to go clubbing. Neither Emma or Richard have yet decided whether to come.

“Work tomorrow,” says Richard.

“He’ll wonder where I am,” says Emma.

They sway slightly.

That night I wake up, briefly, summer heat in the room and not knowing what has woken me.

I can feel another body in my bed. I am lying on my side and they are behind me and I am still half-sleeping. I don’t know if they’re M, or F, a stranger I have brought home from the club, or someone who lived here once and may do so again.

I do not know who it is. I am in no particular hurry to

find out. There is time for that later, tomorrow.

Then I see what has woken me. Through the curtains there is the slow flash of blue lights, stationary and silent, in the street outside.

I watch the lights. At this time of night it is not a routine call. It is an emergency and either it has been prevented in time, or they arrived too late and there is only the stillness of nothing more that can be done. Or it is a false alarm, and the danger has vanished.

Or, perhaps, it hangs in the balance. Oscillating between all the outcomes.

I carry on watching, feeling no urgency.

I listen and I can hear the planes above, stacked at different altitudes, each serving a different reality.

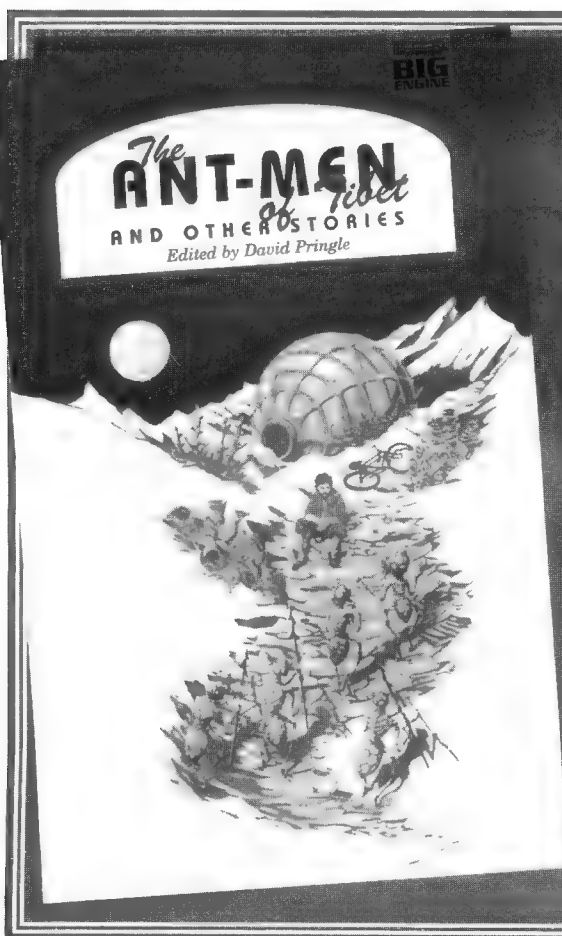
I listen and I can hear the city’s undergrowth. Tyres, wheels, final trains. Everything moves, breathes, everything is predator or prey and has a place in the chain.

The person next to me shifts a little, like a boat at anchor on the tide.

I close my eyes again, but even with my eyes shut I see it: the blue of sirens sweeps my room, surrounds and covers me, like waves, like hooves. Like winter morning somewhere else.

I fall asleep to the sound of carols softly sung, and all possible messages are taken home.

Daniel Kaysen’s previous stories in *Interzone* were “The Eight-Moon Dollar” (issue 178) and “The Comeback Season” (issue 184).



Interzone is Britain’s best-selling science-fiction and fantasy short-fiction magazine, and the only monthly one. *The Ant-Men of Tibet & Other Stories* is a new paperback anthology of ten of its most entertaining stories from the 1990s: flamboyant space operas; chilly science thrillers; contemplative futures and comic fantasies. All are by authors who had their first or near-first sales to the magazine, and each story opens up an intriguing new world of fresh visions and ideas. This collection is a celebration of the diversity that is British science fiction.

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There are Fairies at the Bottom of my Chandelier

STEVEN SPIELBERG PRESENTS
TAKEN

M E D I A C O M M E N T A R Y W I T H E V E L Y N L E W E S

Without doubt, the decline of faith in the 20th century was matched inversely by the rise in predominance of technology: so that it would appear that the technical squeezed out the spiritual. But such a bald statement does not address the yearning for spiritual succour that 20th century mankind continued to experience, the yearning that in the distant past first gave a foothold for the establishment of churches and religions. That the established churches could offer nothing more than moral condemnation in the face of a technology that plainly, while enhancing the lives of every human being on the planet, was simultaneously bringing far more of them to violent, untimely and ugly death-or-maiming, was surely the largest factor in their decline of influence.

The horrors that the military inflicted on massed humanity became ever more vile as the century and its technology progressed, and their reality was brought home to an ever more aware populace with ever greater speed. When Belloc coined his famous and painfully jingoistic "whatever happens we have got the maxim gun and they have not," he could hardly have imagined that a hundred years on we would be committed to a war intended to take back our modern equivalent of the maxim gun from the the fuzzy-wuzzies in order to restore the *status quo ante*. Wresting it from Saddam Hussein's hands is proving to be an occasion for bringing senseless slaughter firmly with us into the 21st century. Furthermore, this war is

being fought in the full glare of immediate publicity. Even more than during our previous adventure into Iraq/Kuwait, we can see the effect of weapons delivered in our names live on satellite television as it happens. Worse still, we will be asked to accept this because, in Bob Dylan's memorable phrase, "you don't count the dead when God's on your side." Is it any wonder, then, that the western world should have had a crisis of faith? Christianity served our parents so badly through the horrors of two world wars that a whole generation of us were brought up largely ignoring the established church; but the craving for spiritual succour was undiminished. Many and various were the modes of faith my generation thus turned to. A few turned back to the established church, others embraced Islam, but many of the more adventurous immersed themselves in apparently infinite variations of oriental mysticism, and sects and cults of all kinds sprang up.

Meanwhile, many among the scientists, engineers, technicians and mechanics saw that the only certain thing in this world of changing spiritual values was what they could measure and control with their own hands, and they turned away from all spiritual blandishments and came to believe in nothing more than the scientific method; which does have one thing in its favour: it demands replicable results. No amount of claiming a scientific breakthrough will do you any good at all if you can't show how you achieved it and someone else can't

reproduce your results; and this was demonstrated superbly with the Cold Fusion fiasco. Scientific faith is faith in method, not in reportage or unknowable supernatural beings.

Unhappily, this in turn has spawned a rhetoric of its own. No practising scientist or engineer has time to test every new breakthrough revealed in the pages of *Nature*, so they have had to come to trust *Nature's* process of peer review. This, coupled with the passive style of presenting experimental results, has led to a situation where spurious results presented in an emulation of this style can be accepted as proof by people who are not thoroughly trained in scientific method.

The problem here is that this tendency is easily exploited, which L. Ron Hubbard proved when he invented his Church of Scientology. However, in parallel with this cynical development, a vast grass-roots movement appeared. Its marks are a distrust of organised religions (and indeed of all organizations), a strong self-belief, and a smattering of scientific training absorbed from their upbringing in a technological society. And, unwittingly, they have reinvented the oldest supernatural belief known to man – belief in the little people.

Of course, fairies and elves and their ilk were finally discredited as serious supernatural entities around the time of the industrial revolution – they are, after all, mostly a manifestation of a bucolic way of life – and Conan Doyle's attempts to verify their existence scientifically did little more

than prove finally that they were no more than phantasms. If fairies are no more than attempts by partially educated people to rationalize strange and otherwise inexplicable experiences, then it is perfectly possible that the grass-roots movement that has now found its name in ufology has similarly invented fairies for itself, but in order to distinguish them from their precursors, it has given them the wonderfully precise and evocative name of "the greys."

No religion, however, is complete without its prophet and its holy texts, and ufology is no exception. To be sure, they are a large, loosely-knit, anarchistic band, but despite their overwhelming suspicion of organizations, threads of coherence have emerged from their ranks, so that magazines such as *The Fortean Times* have achieved some respectability. But what they needed was a larger-than-life leader, and continuity in their texts.

With the movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, Stephen Spielberg dramatized the paranoid fantasies of many of these people – the government/military deny it, so it must be true – and thus gave solid respectability to anyone who wanted to believe in the greys, something that had hitherto seemed simply risible. Now, with his massive television serial *Taken*, Spielberg has supplied the continuity needed, revamping and restating the grey credo, and thus has taken on for himself the mantle of the prophet of ufology. Of course, the serial is credited to one Leslie Bohem, but it is advertised as "*Stephen Spielberg's Taken*," and, given the astonishing similarity to Spielberg's other work, "Leslie Bohem" might just as well be an anagram of "Stephen Spielberg" for all the difference the change of author's name makes.

In *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, Spielberg took several well-known recent mysteries, wove them together with people behaving irrationally after being exposed to flying saucers, showed a set-piece of actual alien abduction of a little boy, then created a truly spectacular finale with the famous chandelier and the mountain. He even had Francois Truffaut establish communication with the greys – although all they ever seemed to be able to say to one another was "Hi!" Again in the words of Bob Dylan, "Nothing is revealed." The entire movie is empty spectacle with what little narrative tension there is supplied by Richard Dreyfuss's increasingly silly behaviour and the promise of a solution of the mystery of the Bermuda Triangle that is never fulfilled except by replacing it with another mystery. Plainly, at this time

Spielberg was a novice when it came to true ufology. It is also likely that the moral code of the time would have denied him the opportunity of showing abductees being sexually investigated in quite the forensic detail that many abductee-claimants have reported.

Thirty years on, he has taken all these extra ideas, ramped up the paranoia with some truly vile government/military representatives, put the whole lot through the Spielberg mincer with all his other tropes, and come up with a blockbuster television spectacular that is just as naïve as *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, but a hell of a lot nastier. Gosh, he must be glad he did this for television. That way, he gets all the money up front. *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* was undoubtedly a blockbuster of its time. I suspect if he had submitted *Taken* to the same democratic box-office test, he would have the biggest turkey of all time on his hands.

Taken is a television serial of ten parts. In the USA they would be ten two-hour episodes, but shown in the UK on blessedly advertising-free BBC, they come in at an hour and forty minutes each. However, in order to promote its new digital channel, BBC3, the BBC decided to show one episode on BBC2, and the following episode immediately after on BBC3 (except that they didn't show the final episode on BBC3 after the penultimate one on BBC2, but held it back to broadcast it simultaneously with BBC2 (this is extra choice in viewing?!), thus destroying my schedule and making this column very late). Oh, how I craved those advert breaks. We understand from production details of *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer* that each show is planned around the advert breaks; narrative tension is maintained across each interruption by reaching a mini-crisis. But where Joss Whedon is a companion who engages our interest,

piques our curiosity and invites our sympathy, making the bridge across the advert break effortless and virtually invisible when watching on BBC or DVD, Spielberg is a manipulator, no more than an arm-twisting bully, really, and three hours and twenty minutes of watching two of these episodes back to back left me feeling severely mauled.

The location notes were the first things that began to grate. The early episodes of this serial feature a number of widely disparate plot lines, and it was obviously felt that the audience might find this confusing. So, at the opening of each sequence, we get a dateline, a place name, and a state name – all of which were irrelevant if you were actually paying attention. For anyone, such as me, who is extremely vague on the geography of the USA, they might as well have been a random jumble of letters. Oh, how we longed for the certainties of something like *Dallas*, where a simple external shot of the office or the ranch would establish where the next scene was set. The fact that none of the locations in *Taken* were memorable didn't help, but some of the characters were, and I felt patronized and insulted that the producers thought it necessary constantly to remind me of setting and time.

Often accompanying these establishing shots is a voice-over of a kind of syrupy out-of-the-mouths-of-babes cod-wisdom that made me cringe whenever it occurred, although sometimes thankfully it was so long and turgid that it actually became impossible to follow. This narration, all in the first person, is voiced by what is plainly a little girl, but it only becomes apparent in episode seven that this is supposed to be Ali, played by Dakota Fanning, writing in her diary. Up to this point, all the events we have seen occur before her birth. Imagine watching *Bladerunner* with the Deckard narra-

Facing page: *Taken* – Dakota Channing as Ali, conjures flying saucers for the credulous.

Below, a younger Ali is venerated by tame dolphins. Light shines.





Chad Morgan plays Becky Clarke, who is seduced by the alien "John," played by Eric Close. She has a son, Jacob, who in turn has a daughter...



...Lisa (played by Emily Bergl), who is taken by the aliens and mated with...



...Jesse Keys (played by Desmond Harrington) whose father was taken and whose grandfather was the pilot of the B-17 that was taken whole.



As a result, Lisa gives birth, not without some trouble (she dies, and is revived by the aliens), to a baby she names "Ali" ...



...and then tries to live a normal family life! By the time the child is eight, now played by Dakota Fanning, she is being pursued by both aliens and government, and has to decide who to go with.



tive removed (you can, with the Director's Cut, and it's well worth it), but with instead a munchkin's voice saying something like, "all the people of Los Angeles had emigrated to the new planetary colonies, except for the ones who didn't want to go, and the ones who couldn't. I don't know why Rick Deckard hadn't gone, but it wasn't because he liked his job. He was a blade runner..."

This is, of course, silly, but expose yourself to it for long enough and the silliness, like novocaine, creeps in and begins to numb your senses. Which is just as well, because the attempts at characterization in this serial range from the daft to the bizarre, only touching on the honest or the real in between apparently by accident. Anyone in a military uniform is an evil, self-serving son-of-a-bitch unless he is either an enlisted man or a war-hero pilot. Any woman, no matter how sparky, is there solely to be used by ruthless self-seeking males (human or alien) to propagate their genes. That is, up to around 1985, when women start to take on some of the stereotypical vile male roles as well.

It seems that Spielberg can only think in terms of stereotypes, and I actually got bored with spotting the re-use of idiotic tropes from his early movies – from pursuit by a homicidal truck to the super bright lights aimed into the camera lens to conceal the lack of real special effects, the lack of any real content, characterization or even depth of thought behind the presentation is appalling. I mean, does he really believe that aliens who didn't want to be observed would find a quiet bit of remote desert somewhere and then prance around the sky in huge animated chandeliers? Say it with me, "Puh-leeese!"

The lacunae also defy belief, although it has become clear that Hollywood writers in general don't give two hoots about continuity. In the opening episode a Flying Fortress over Germany during World War II is hit and begins to fall out of formation (and, incidentally, the aeroplane special effects are uniformly awful), but, where it would have crashed, instead it disappears into a blue hole in the sky. Back in the USA, the captain is feted as a hero for saving his crew, and he has frequent dreams where they are all being examined by greys when he spots a machine gun from the aeroplane, vaults off his examination couch, grabs the gun and shoots every grey in the room. The thing is, if he shot all the aliens, how did he get back to Earth? Whenever anyone else is taken by the aliens in this story, they are found hours or days later looking a bit dazed. But this really rather vital piece of the jigsaw of nar-

rative is simply missing.

It has to be said that, labouring beneath the Spielberg trope tripe, there is actually a sensible story trying to be heard – imagine if the aliens saw us as we see dolphins. Indeed, there is a scene in a dolphinarium where the guide says of the captive dolphins that, "once they have been taken, it is very difficult to return them to the wild." This perceptive gloss by juxtaposition on alien abduction of humans is promptly overshadowed by the three (presumably) animatronic dolphins in the tank going into a kind of worshipful pose towards the toddler Ali (can that name be because she is half "ali-en"?). Earlier in the story, it is plain that the government/airforce whatever-your-paranoid-choice-of-oppressor is emulating the aliens in taking its own citizens and experimenting on them to find out what the aliens want, and thus even the title achieves more than the usual Spielbergian two-dimensions.

Another deepening of the plot occurs when the three-wise-dolphins worshipping the baby messiah is repeated with variations in the desert where three grunts visit Ali in her bed in an old barn – the warm glow from her cot is positively biblical. Add to this the self-sacrifice of the final episode, where Ali gives herself up to the aliens in order to save the human beings around her from hurting one another, and it is clear that a parallel to the Christian message is being invoked. These elements are probably all that remains of credited author Leslie Bohem's story, and it is an appealingly simple and clever story which could have made a very fine 90-minute movie, especially given the superb camera work and lighting – except when they point the light into the camera to engender mystery. I hate that. I'm watching to look and see, not to be dazzled. It's the Spielbergian equivalent of smoke and mirrors, and I detest it. Hiding behind bright lights simply means you've got nothing to show! Whether Spielberg took the story and made it over, or whether Bohem somehow saw the possibility of parlaying this small idea up into a major money-spinner on the back of Spielberg's reputation I will never know, because I'm really not that interested in how stuff this bad gets made.

In which case, many of you are probably wondering, why did I watch it. The plain answer is, I was hoping for something better. This project cost a lot of money, and the last project of the Sci-Fi Channel's that I am aware of, *Dune*, was a major success. I was hoping that because Spielberg was only "Executive Producer" that someone else's ideas might have been allowed to come through. Instead, what we get

appears to be Spielberg's resentful reaction to seeing the success of *The X-Files* using what perhaps he considers to be his trademark notions.

I never liked *The X-Files* either, but at least the special effects looked real to me, and there was some attempt at scientific credibility. The more I think about this, the more it seems likely that the whole thing is an attempt to parallel biblical history, so leading the human longing for spiritual fulfilment that manifests in sect and cult and flying saucer belief back into the Christian mainstream. Unfortunately, it will only work on the credulous and lame of brain, and is thus unworthy of a true science-fiction audience.

Meanwhile, back in the real world, *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* moves towards a triumphal conclusion with what appears to be, in musical terms, a reprise and coda, with all the characters who have ever appeared in the show being brought back for bit parts in this final battle with the source of all evil. Last night's episode appeared to be uncomfortably on-message for the war we have launched on Iraq, and that is something I never thought I would say. The sabre-rattling and jingoism in *Enterprise* appears to have faded away, so it is all the more surprising to see it manifest in *Buffy* – although I have to say that if Joss Whedon were writing George Bush's speeches, there would be a lot less fun made of him. Buffy here became positively Churchillian in her determination to overcome evil, and subjected to that speech, I would follow her into the mouth of hell... which is what I suspect she was asking.

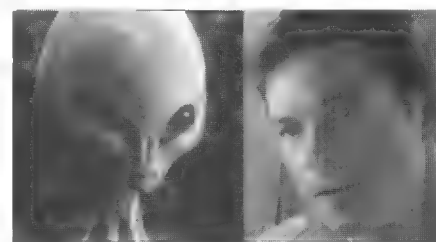
For the first time, individual episodes of Buffy are not as satisfying as they used to be. They used to be single stories set against the overall fight against evil. This series feels much more like a serial, where a single element of an overall plot is advanced in each show, and there is no resolution of a single theme. Which, strangely, is making the overall story more intriguing. In early episodes, we saw young women being hunted down and killed in Buffy's dreams at the beginnings of the shows. These were never mentioned again in the individual episodes. But they are very relevant now. Giles also is apparently attacked, and now he has none of Giles' distinctive foibles, and thus seems peculiarly un-human. The new foe, The First, is an amorphous evil that can only take the shape of dead people. This at once gives the opportunity to parade all the dear departed actors for their one last appearance in a doomed show, and, beneath all that flummery, tells us something about Buffy and Spike, for

The First can take Buffy's form in Spike's eyes. As a series, it does everything right that *Taken* did wrong, and where I was looking forward to the end of *Taken*, I am dreading the final finale of *Buffy*, as after that there is nothing definite on the horizon that is going to be worth watching.

Except, of course, for *Enterprise*. Strange to say, this has improved vastly in its second series. It would appear that the makers have begun to see its strengths and weaknesses, and they are playing successfully to both, so where we have to have Silly Scott Bakula in the show, we get a lightly ironic and often humorous episode, where his clownish acting can be used to good effect – I'm thinking particularly of one episode recently where he nearly loses his ship because he complained that his chair squeaked, and another where they couldn't get spare parts from an otherwise friendly race because his dog piddled on some sacred trees. Where they can successfully sideline Bakula for most of the show, we tend to get more pithy and gritty science-fiction stories, often involving T'Pol at centre stage.

Indeed, favourite episode of this series so far was one where T'Pol related a story of the real first visit to Earth by Vulcans, which was apparently in the 1950s. Trip exclaims that it sounds "just like an episode of *The Twilight Zone*," and indeed it is, and as such it works superbly. No silly messing about trying to point out precursors to things we are familiar with in other *Star Trek* series, no tiresome banter between regular characters, just a nice little story about three aliens stranded in a small US town in 1957 and how, superior beings though they are, they learn from and bring benefit to the community they have been forced to join. Every story should have a heart, and the *Star Trek* people have become past masters at letting just enough of it show that it is warm without becoming sickly and sentimental. Stephen Spielberg would have done well to learn this lesson. Then we might have been spared the unrelenting nastiness of many of his characters, which is relieved only by small and insincere changes in the final scene. Also, he might then have spotted the inherent contradiction in that final scene. In the unctuous munchkin voice-over of Ali's transubstantiation, she says that, despite never getting answers, we should keep asking the questions – but this is the very attitude that has driven the most ruthless and despicable character to her many atrocities. "My curiosity, right or wrong?" I don't think so. He should have known better.

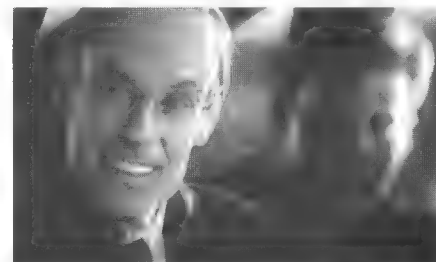
Evelyn Lewes



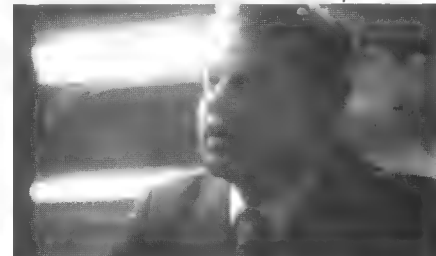
Eric Close plays the alien, "John," here seen both in and out of makeup.



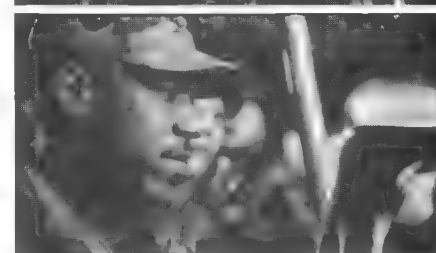
Matt Frewer, probably more recognizable to us as Max Headroom, turns the role of Dr Chet Wakeman into a fascinated and amiable villain.



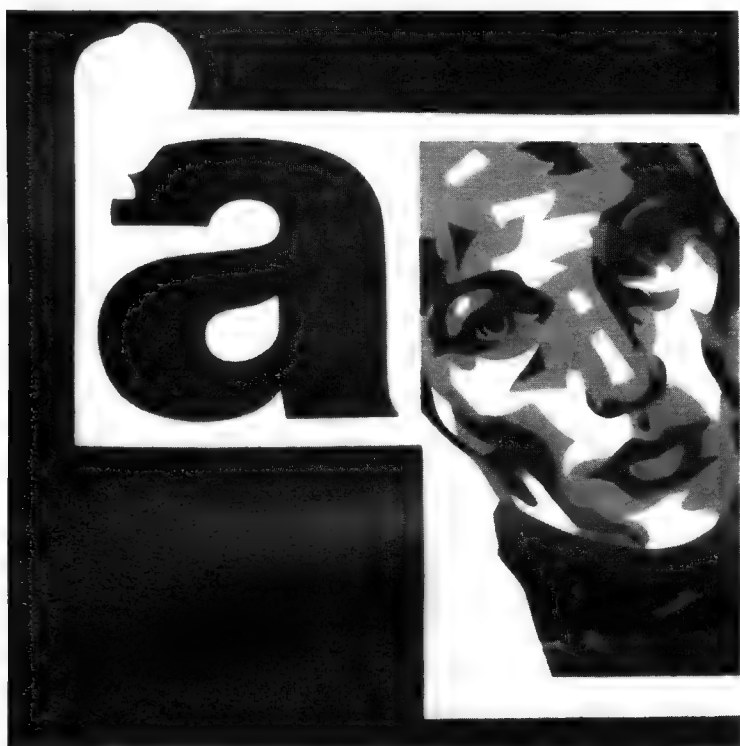
Andy Powers plays Eric Crawford, son-and-heir of Owen Crawford, who was the man who started the whole USAF/UFO cover-up



He has a daughter, Mary Crawford (played by Heather Donahue) who is both more driven and nastier than father and grandfather put together. (She is seen here with a grunt who didn't make it onto the cast list supplied by the BBC.)



James McDaniel plays a surprisingly dense but self-serving General Beers who tries to use the alien power manifested in Ali to further his own career.



Still turning motifs upside down

Judith Clute interviewed by Paul Brazier



JUDITH CLUTE, our cover artist this month, produced many covers for science fiction and fantasy books in the 1970s and has been featured in several recent books on fantasy art. She has also developed a following in the fine art collectors market, and recently launched a website devoted to her work.

Judith was born in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, in 1942, during the second world war. Her father was an officer in the Royal Canadian Air Force, training troops for the war in Europe. After the war she grew up in Toronto, with no siblings, but close friends among the Chinese community and refugees from Estonia, Latvia, Poland and the Ukraine. Her educa-





tion began at Brown School but at the age of 12 she was sent to Bishop Strachan School, a private school for Anglican females, matriculating in 1961.

While finishing her last two years of schooling, she took extra evening art classes at The Artists' Workshop in Toronto. She adored life drawing and painting portraits of models. At the same time she attended the Banff School of Fine Arts in the summers of 1960 and 1961. There, her teachers were Francoise Andre and Charles Stegeman, a married couple of artists from Belgium, who reckoned Judith had talent and invited her to be their apprentice. Amazingly, they managed to convince her parents, and so she dropped out of regular school and started into the life-long process of learning and exhibiting.

Although she started painting seriously with this apprenticeship in the



early 1960s, she didn't hit her stride until 1970 in London when she exhibited in a two-person show at the New Arts Lab with Pamela Zoline, a fellow student from the early days with the Stegemans. At this time she was producing what she calls *boardpaintings*. These were painted on whitened board, but in acrylic – married by now to John Clute, and sharing their Camden Town flat with Pamela Zoline and John Lifton, she didn't want to subject those she lived with to the turpentine effects of oil paints. "John and I slept in the room in which we worked – our bed was in one half of the room, and John's desk and my easel were on the other side by the windows."

Apart from the medium being different, her current work bears a direct relationship to the paintings of this time. Janet Daley, panel member of the radio programme *Moral Maze*, and now writing for the *Daily Telegraph* wrote of her exhibition at Triad, Regional Arts Centre, Bishop's Stortford, in 1974:

The paintings seem to grip one with their extraordinary mysteriousness... They combine the animal with the machine with the human in ways that make us want to say, at the same time, "why?" and "Yes, of course." The fact that the images point in different directions and are often on a totally different scale from one another adds a further level of ambiguity, a worlds-within-worlds quality...

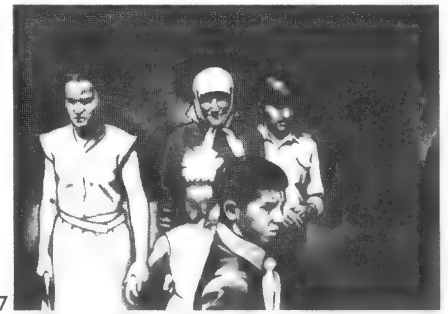
Early in the 1980s, Judith rented a couple of studios from SPACE and so was able to experiment with etching. She also returned to working in oil on stretched canvas. The first studio was in Wapping Wall. "I look at the renovated warehouses there today and marvel at how our drafty studios have metamorphosed into Manhattan Loft style apartments." The second set of

studios is still in existence in Hackney: Victor House, Richmond Road. Here, she began a few large paintings – "but not so big that they couldn't be hung on the walls of ordinary homes; I like my work to be 'domestic'." One of these was *The Golden Years Return* (1983). Its inspiration came from a Giorgione composition of 500 years before called *The Three Philosophers*. It is in landscape mode with a dark cave, probably Plato's, on the left. "I borrowed the right side of the painting and changed a few things, like having one of the 'philosophers' holding a Picasso-type painting."

Occasionally, an event in the outside world hits Judith with such force that she has to make a painting or two in response. The Chernobyl nuclear reactor melt-down of 1987 was such an event, and one of the resulting paintings was *The Awakened* (1987). It is based, with changes of course, on a photograph taken of local people as they were being tested for radiation. In the actual photograph they looked sunny and brave. In Judith's work, their faces are stressed, as though they know something of their future. Another painting produced in response to Chernobyl was *Plato's Cave* (1987) – the firemen are based on firemen who had to go in shortly after the melt-down.

Around this time Judith also produced several book covers for The Women's Press, and the cover for Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1985) won a place in *The Association of Illustrators: Tenth Annual Publication* (1985).

By the 1990s she was painting back at home. When Pamela Zoline and John Lifton moved to Colorado, their room became her studio, and so the solvents of oil painting were no longer a problem. She painted several works



in *The Footpads of Darwin* series, the first of which has an upside down monkey face. The women with their backs to us, one of whom has a bird on her head, are standing on the red-faced monkey: "we are all, in some sense, footpads," she says, "which is an old English term for 'thieves'." John Grant says of this painting –

This surreal work can be read as almost a portrait of crosshatch fantasy (the breed of fantasy in which widely disparate elements, both old and new, are woven together to create something entirely fresh.

The Encyclopedia of Fantasy & Science Fiction Art Techniques, Titan, 1996

In 2001, when on a water colour-painting visit to South Dakota, one of the group, Joe Haldeman, said that Judith's work has a "restlessness and unpredictability with regard to perspective," and that "every painting has a unique, and sometimes obscure hierarchy of image."

Currently, two series begun in the 1990s, *Footpads of Darwin* and *Progress of Anansi*, are still alive for her and she is working further with the iconography of the letter "a" and recurring images of elephants and masks. "And I'm still turning motifs upside down."

You can find Judith Clute on-line at www.judithclute.co.uk

Judith was Guest Artist at 2001: A Celebration of British SF, in Liverpool.

Her work is featured in two books that appeared in 2002 –

Fantasy Art Masters, Harper Collins, edited by Dick Jude – www.collins.co.uk

Paper Tiger Fantasy Art Gallery, edited by Paul Barnett – www.papertiger.co.uk/ezine/fantasy_gallery/index.html

Key to illustrations

1. – jc (2001)
2. – *Footpads of Darwin* 1 (199??)
3. – *The Golden Years Return* (1983)
4. – Judith and John Clute
5. – Judith in Bloomsbury, 2001
6. – At the launch party for the website – M. John Harrison, Judith, and Cath Phillips
7. – *The Awakened* (1987)

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All photographs are copyright © 2003 Paul Brazier



Again, censorship strikes! *Ansible's* one e-mail subscriber at parliament.uk was denied his February issue by some strange power which has yet to master the apostrophe: "[Y]our email has been blocked and will be deleted by the Houses of Parliament in due course since we believe it has inappropriate content. The intended recipient has not received the email. • In the event that you believe the email has been blocked incorrectly please contact the intended recipient directly to discuss it's release." *The Register* reports that this new, prudish blocking system objects not only to raunchy *Ansible* but to MPs' own e-mail discussions of legislation about s*x... not to mention Plaid Cymru daring to use that filthy language Welsh.

THE TWISTER WORLD

Mike Ashley, whom we have long suspected of criminal tendencies, is shortlisted for an Edgar Allan Poe award, the crime field's Hugo: his *The Mammoth Encyclopedia of Modern Crime Fiction* made the final ballot under Best Critical/Biographical. Another familiar name in this category is Peter Haining with *The Classic Era of Crime Fiction*. Also, Graham Masterton is up for Best Paperback Original with *Trauma*.

Sam J. Lundwall, dean of Swedish sf authors, has publicly and permanently resigned from SFWA (where for many years he'd been an Overseas Regional Director) after failing to persuade that many-headed organization to oppose war on Iraq. "The response was, to put it very mildly, rather negative... I had hopes for so much more. I have so many friends in the US. I have spent more than 30 years in the SFWA, doing my little bit. Now I realize it was all in vain."

Ken MacLeod has been in the news again, sort of. Excited TV watchers report that the Channel 4 comedy-drama *The Book Group* has a novelist character called Ken MacLeod. After another character had sex with and then broke up with him, sf fans thrilled to the resonant line "You're a lousy lay, Ken MacLeod." Any publicity, they say, is good publicity.

Will Self pondered Ben Okri's suggestion that living British authors should be honoured by having streets etc. named after them, and felt that "none of the British writers I know and admire would dream of accepting such a tin-pot accolade." With one possible exception. "I dare say J.G. Ballard would be tickled by the thought of announcements on incoming London

ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

flights of the form: 'Would you please fasten your seatbelts, as we will soon be landing at Ballard Airport, newly named after the author of *Crash*...' (Evening Standard, 31 Jan)

INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

As Others See Us. Sf was once again defined in a February *Newsnight* discussion of whether designer babies could lead to a genetic underclass as in *Gattaca*. Professor Steve Jones used scientific logic to dismiss this speculation as ridiculous: "*Gattaca* is a science-fiction film – it's cowboys and Indians with rocketships." • George Clooney applied a familiar spin to that remake of *Solaris*: "Believe me, Fox wasn't thrilled to do a \$47 million sci-fi film that has nothing to do with sci-fi and everything to do with a man's belief system." (Interview, *Time Out*, February)

Nebula Final Ballot. Novel shortlist: Kelley Eskridge, *Solitaire*; Neil Gaiman, *American Gods*; Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Other Wind*; Robert A. Metzger, *Picov-erse*; China Miéville, *Perdido Street Station*; Michael Swanwick, *Bones of the Earth*. In other news, Britain's and *Interzone's* very own Charles Stross made it to the novelette shortlist with "Lobsters" (*Asimov's* 6/01).

R.I.P. *Lana Clarkson* (1961-2003), the 41-year-old actress shot dead at record producer Phil Spector's home on 3 February, had several minor genre credits: the Conan-esque *Deathstalker* (1984) and *Barbarian Queen* (1985), *Amazon Women on the Moon* (1987), etc. She had also attended numerous US comics and media conventions. • Belated notice: *Mary Wesley* (1912-2002), UK author best known for mainstream novels but who also

described post-nuclear-holocaust events in *The Sixth Seal* (1969), died on 30 December 2002 at home in Totnes, Devon. She was 90.

Tactfully Phrased. "Supernatural thriller writer Doug Clegg has been known as an innovator. In order to bring attention to himself and try to bore a solid core of genre fans, he became one of the first ever to give an e-book away for free on the Internet." (*PWDaily*, 7 February.)

Red House Awards 2003. Contenders for these children's book awards – voted by children – include Lemony Snicket's *The Ersatz Elevator* and Eoin Colfer's *Artemis Fowl: The Arctic Incident* in, respectively, the younger and older readers' categories. Presentations on 14 June.

Science Corner. "As I think you were told before, thyrrium-261 is not indigen-ous to Earth. It comes from a binary star system called the Pleiades, a system not far from our own. / Now, as you can probaby imagine, planets in binary star systems are affected by all sorts of forces because of their twin suns – photosynthesis is doubled; gravitational effects, as well as resistance to gravity, are enormous. As such, elements found on planets in binary systems are usually heavier and denser than similar elements found here on Earth. Thyrrium-261 is just such an element. / It was first found in petrified form in the walls of a meteor crater in Arizona in 1972." (Matthew Reilly, *Temple*, 1999)

Mediawatch. On *Desert Island Discs* (23 Feb), George Clooney chose William Shatner's recording of "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds" as one he'd like to be marooned with, since it would help him escape from the island. As Clooney approximately put it, "If this recording were playing, you'd hollow out your own leg to make a canoe to get away."

Thog's Masterclass. *Dept of Too Much Information.* "The patron licked his fingers with saliva." • *Eyeballs in the Sky Dept.* "His itinerant brown eyes darted onto the dim city street outside." • *Dept of Single Yet Amazingly Devastating Shots.* "The Scorpion smirked before sending a bullet into Francesco's forehead. Looking around the blood and gut-spattered dining room, the killer..." • *Religious Burdens Dept.* "The Crusader vision of our equestrian order is at the service of our faith' were words from Muhlor's investiture into a centuries old order of Church knighthood that he carried with him everywhere." (All from Peter Senese and Robert Geis, *Cloning Christ*, 2002)

The Brutal Shadow

Matt Colborn

The Xolhut is what the Yukagir call it, and they believe the animal's creation to be the blunder of a superior being.

The Yukagir inhabit the Taimyr peninsula of Siberia, in the wilderness of forest and marsh that stretches between the Kolyma and Indigirka rivers. They believe that the Xolhut casts a spirit-shadow that falls on any who disturb the creatures' remains. We call the Xolhut the mammoth and, against all odds, I can confirm that the Yukagir were right.

The night – and my slumber – had been unsettled, but the morning sky was blue and there was a crisp, autumn chill in the air. Compared to the Taimyr peninsula, the weather was mild, but it was sufficient to remind me of that place, and of Tubyaku. I was getting into my battered old Fiesta when his round, lined, alcohol-fat face popped into my mind. Tubyaku wasn't a Yukagir, but he knew them, just as he knew the Xolhut.

I was late into work, but so was everyone else. The anti-cloning protesters had been blocking the entrance to the Biology car park, forcing us to leave our cars round the back of the physics building.

The protesters had been there for a few days. We'd even had a couple of stones thrown through the window

of the Biology block. It was hardly surprising they'd come, for word of what we were doing had spread quickly.

In the early days, we had tried to keep the project a secret, but it was a little difficult when we were receiving truckloads of straw every day. Worse, Nellie's yard was easily visible to anyone who walked up onto the hills around the campus, and it *was* hard to miss an elephant doing her morning exercise.

When I got to Biology's entrance doors, a cleaner was scraping off some stickers that the protesters had left on the glass. LEAVE MAMMOTHS BURIED! screamed one; BAN CLONING! shouted another. Stepping over the cleaner's bucket, I hurried into the lab.

Shortly after my arrival, Pamela asked me for my results, and I handed her the printouts without comment. I'd had the PCR readouts on the S/2005B specimen for a couple of days, but no one had bothered requesting them before. I hadn't felt inclined to volunteer them because they'd been far from spectacular. The longest DNA fragment I'd managed to extract had turned out to be only 930 base pairs long. Pathetic!

Pamela was only being charitable, asking for my results. They were all being charitable, and had been ever since we'd crawled out of the blizzard. Even Kevin, who'd hated me before, never failed to be polite. Whenever he saw me he would grin in that cold way of his, say

hello, and ask how my work was going. Terribly, thank you Kevin. How are you finding success?

He'd won, you see. Ever since the embryo had been successfully implanted inside Nelly, he'd won. Kevin Blake, co-pioneer of the intracytoplasmic sperm injection technique, godfather of Pleistocene park.

"Don't be silly, Roger," Pamela scolded, after I'd voiced my opinions to her, "Your work's essential. If we're to revive a mammoth population, we're going to need genetically diverse individuals. The more material that we can recover, the better." I grunted in reply, turned the PCR on and placed the first of the specimens inside.

"You're getting quite dextrous again," she observed.

"Thanks," I replied, "but I'd still rather have the fingers." Pamela didn't say anything immediately. She just looked at me.

"What is it?" I snapped.

"Roger..." she ventured, "are you okay? You seem very... preoccupied at the moment."

"I'm fine," I said, managing a smile. That seemed to satisfy her, and she left.

Pamela was the only one of them that I trusted. It was hard not to; she'd saved my life.

It was near the end of the season, out on the Taimyr peninsula, when the whiteout came in fast. The wind had taken us by surprise; a savage, boreal wind, straight from the North Pole. It froze our breath to crystal and brought the ice-mists with it.

Have you ever been in a white-out? It's like you've been put inside a giant, polythene container. Around, above, below is nothing but blank, cold white. At first, it's intriguing, exciting even, but the novelty soon palls. The walls of white begin to press upon your senses, and the eyes hunger for some sort of visual reference. And when it doesn't come, they raven.

"Stay together!" Vladimir called, and we would have – I would have – except...

Except for the sound. It was carried to me, on the wind; a low rumble like a glacier cracking, or –

Then I smelt it, the sharp, musky tang of a large animal. The titan stood only yards away, a dark blot in the mists. I wanted to pursue, even then, but it was so cold that when I started to follow, my lungs ached, my head numbed and my joints seized. I could only watch as my quarry vanished into the fog, its heavy footfalls swallowed by the wind.

I awoke to find my bedroom window flapping in the wind. Clambering out of bed, I grabbed the sash and watched the clouds race, their bellies stained grey-orange by the street lamps. In the corner of the car park opposite, the branches of the pine were nodding furiously and from above came a rumble of thunder.

Pulling the window closed, I flopped back into bed, wincing at the cold, sweat-damp bedclothes. Too exhausted to change them, I glanced at the bedside clock and saw that it had just turned three O'clock. There was a flash, a moment's anticipatory silence, and then a second thunder-crash.

The next morning, unable to face the lab, I 'phoned in sick. Kevin answered, worse luck.

"I'm not coming in today," I said, my voice flat.

"Not to worry," he said briskly. "Can any of us do anything?" *Useless fucker*, was the subtext.

"No thank you!" I snapped, slamming the 'phone down.

Wanting to walk off my fury, I left the flat and strolled into the park opposite.

It was a good park, for England, planted in the main with ash, sycamore and oak. Most of the leaves, yellowed in a long, lazy, Indian-summer September, had been stripped from the branches by last night's gale. Drifts of them had accumulated against the low, brick walls of the park and large branches, torn from their trees, lay scattered on the grass.

Leaving the path, I wandered over the park lawns and found two of the groundsmen erecting a barrier around a wide, deep hole. The hole had, apparently, appeared last night.

"Subsidence problems," was the groundsmen's explanation. Standing at the edge of the hole, I looked down into blackness. It was like a mine shaft, hidden for years, had opened up in the middle of the park. Which was ridiculous, because there weren't any mine shafts in our area.

An envoy of Peter the Great once reported that the Tungus, Yakuts and Ostyaks believed the mammoth to be an underground dweller, whose movements caused thunder and lightning. Every so often, one would break through to the surface and, unable to breathe the air, would expire. This accounted for the fact that they often found their remains close to deep, earthen pits.

"You!" Someone shouted. Startled from the daydream, I saw a youth striding across the grass towards me, forefinger jabbing the air. "I know you!" The young man – he couldn't have been more than twenty – was a vision of beads, piercings, khaki and military surplus boots.

"I doubt it," I mumbled, walking away.

"Wait!" he said, catching up. "You're one of the ones at the university. One of the *cloners*." He spat the word, like it was something rotten.

"I don't clone," I protested, "I just recover material from fossil remains."

"Still, they need you."

"No," I shook my head, immediately wishing that that had been a lie.

"Have you ever thought," the youth pressed, keeping pace with me, "About how immoral your work is?"

"What?" I answered, suddenly angry. "Which part? Cloning, genetic modification, or playing God?"

"Bringing a prehistoric creature back to life when we're driving so many to extinction already."

"We?" I snarled. We were at the park gates now, but I stopped, folded my arms and faced him. "Are you planning to follow me all the way home?"

"You're trying to raise the mammoth from the dead," the youth continued, "but do you know how many elephants have been slaughtered in Africa in the last twenty years? Do you know how few tigers are left, how few

Orang-utans, Arabian oryx or Florida manatees? Why are you using your skills to resurrect extinct animals when you could be using them to help save those that humanity's wiping out?"

"The techniques we're developing could help endangered..."

"Don't feed me that line," the boy interrupted. "They won't be, and you know it."

I opened my mouth, but realized, to my shame, that I'd run out of replies. It was true. They wouldn't be. *Saving* an animal from extinction just didn't hold the same kudos that resurrecting an extinct species did. No kudos, no money, as Kevin would say.

It's not like we were unaware of it, either. Once, I'd seen Pamela staring at the protesters from the lab window.

"Sometimes I wonder whether I should be down there," she'd muttered, "Instead of up here." All that I could do was nod.

What the young man didn't know was that we – humans – were probably responsible for the mammoths' demise as well. Current orthodoxy had it that the mammoth was wiped out by a mixture of overhunting – by our ancestors – and a disease. This disease jumped either from the people or their best friends, the dogs. We've been murdering species for a long time.

I had more bad dreams that night, and woke, again, in the small hours of the morning. After several hours of fitful tossing, I abandoned sleep and got out of bed. Going to the kitchen to make breakfast, I found that I was out of milk. It was just past six in the morning, but there was a local newsagent that opened early, so I dressed and went there. I found a couple of burly men unloading the morning papers from the delivery truck and inside, the shopkeeper was laying out the morning edition of the local paper. The headline immediately caught my eye: GRAVEYARD DESECRATION BAFPLES POLICE. Unaccountably uneasy, I asked the shopkeeper what it concerned.

"Haven't you heard?" he exclaimed, incredulous. "It was on the telly all last night!"

"I don't watch TV much."

"Someone vandalized the Royal Hill graveyard. I'm not talking about graffiti on a couple of the 'stones, neither. It was like someone had gone mad with a JCB."

Heart thumping, I left the shop, and ran in the direction of Royal Hill. Twenty minutes later, I was climbing its house-encrusted side. At the top of the hill, I found three police cars parked next to the graveyard's entrance. Closer to, I saw several men clad in white overalls and masks, clambering over the graves. A few steps closer, I smelt the rot.

The graveyard capped the hill. In the centre was a little Victorian Chapel, surrounded by the oldest graves. Encircling them like an iris around a pupil were the newer graves, separated from the road by a low encircling wall.

Perhaps a quarter of the graveyard had been vandalised. The police had covered most of the damage with sheets of transparent polythene, but below the sheets you could still see mounds of earth and gaping graves. The

gravestones lay scattered like torn teeth. As for the bodies... I'm not sure, but that smell told me that it hadn't taken them all.

I met Tubyaku in Khatanga, about a week after I had emerged from what they called a hospital. Khatanga was the largest town in the Taimyr, and was where they'd flown me in the storm's aftermath.

Tubyaku lived in one of the concrete, Soviet housing monstrosities located at the edge of town. I remember him opening his flat door, peering at me suspiciously and muttering something in the nganasan language.

"There is a shadow on you," he said after, in Russian. His breath smelt of vodka and his flat was almost empty. There was a cot covered in crumpled bedclothes in one corner and a shaman's drum in another. Beside the bathroom door was a rickety wardrobe where he kept coathangers and empty vodka bottles. The windows overlooked the edge of town, but visible beyond the clutter of derelict buildings was the dirty-green, ocean flat tundra.

We sat on two unstable, wooden chairs and faced each other over a low table.

"You saw," I pressed, "the shadow. How did I get it?" The old man began to laugh. His face was wide and flat, like all of his people's and his skin was the colour of bronze. His long hair, grey-flecked black, was thinning.

"If you sit under a tree, do you own the shadow that is cast upon you? It's not yours. Perhaps it belongs to one of the ones you dug up."

"Dug up?" I asked, suddenly nervous. "How did you...."

"I read newspapers, I saw your photograph. You came with the Russian scientists, the ones who want to find the mammoths."

It was Tubyaku who told me about the mammoth's habit of sneaking down from the mountains and grazing upon graveyard bones.

I went to work, but couldn't stop thinking about Royal hill. Turning from the lab bench in despair, I stared out of the window. Biology, being on the edge of campus, boasted good views of the woodlands beyond. A few days ago, the trees had been a vision of yellow, russet and brown, but the storm had stripped most of them bare, leaving a wood of blackened skeletons. On top of that, the clouds had thickened as the morning progressed, and heavy rain was now falling from the sky.

There was a movement in the woods, a ripple of motion in the bushes. A student, perhaps, braving the muddy paths and October rain.

"Roger?" It was Pamela, smiling, clutching a large, brown envelope.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes, of course." I nodded at the envelope. "What's that?"

"I thought you'd like to see the scans they've done. Nellie's coming up to nine months now, and...." She opened the envelope, producing a couple of printouts.

"She took ages to get used to the harness," Pamela explained, showing me a blurred, black-and-white image. "But the vet's been getting quite proficient with the ultrasound." She indicated the uterus, reproductive mem-

brane, legs, ears, trunk and tail.

"A viable calf," I said, nodding. It was hard not to be awed by Kevin's work. Sighing, I said; "I'm not getting any work done here, and I fancy a breather. Do you want to show me Nellie?"

"Of course!" Pamela bubbled, smiling. "But I'm surprised, Roger; you've never shown any interest in her before...."

"I hadn't seen those ultrasounds before."

Pamela led me down the long, concrete corridor that led to the animal house entrance. Keying in the entry code, she opened the heavy, maroon door and led me down a corridor lined with sliding doors. Behind them, I heard scampering, flapping, buzzing, barks and yelps. We kept, I knew, animals of every variety, from ants and bees to rats, dogs and nautili. Here was another reason for protesters to besiege us.

Reaching the end door, Pamela slid it open and my hand flew up to my nose.

"Phew," I said.

"They always smell more in captivity," Pamela smiled apologetically, "but you soon get used to it."

The mesh-lined walkway that we entered lined one end of the barn in which Nellie was housed. The barn was heated, which was costing a fortune, but it was necessary in the English climate. The last thing Kevin wanted was a pregnant elephant with a cold. There was a large pile of elephant dung in one corner – which Nellie's keeper was attacking with a shovel – and mound of straw in another, which the lady was tucking into.

"Hello, dear!" Pamela called, and Nellie turned slightly, but instead of lumbering over, grabbed another trunk full of straw.

"Oh, well," Pamela sighed. "She's eating for two." She continued to talk, but I'd stopped listening. Watching the animal, huge with child, munching and huffing, made me unaccountably uneasy.

"I've seen enough," I said, turning to go. Pamela, used to my moods, didn't stop me.

I worked late into the evening, unwilling to return to my small, dark, empty flat. There was something comforting about the brightly lit lab, especially when the darkness began pressing on the windows. It was comforting because, for the first time since childhood, I wasn't sure what the darkness hid.

I left the building around ten. The main doors were locked, so I had to leave by the back entrance that faced the woods.

The rain-clouds were gone, revealing a fat moon in a star-laden sky. There was a tang of frost in the air, and my breath was cloudy in the orange night-lights. I shivered, but it was warm compared to the Taimyr. Maybe my body was responding to a memory of cold, rather than the cold itself.

Then there was a crashing sound from the direction of the woods. I froze, staring frantically in the direction of the noise, but the glow of the sodium lamps lining the road made it impossible to see beyond. Although alarmed, I was also curious. Crossing the road, I shielded

my eyes from the lights, and peered into the woods.

At first, I saw nothing but blackness, but could smell damp moss and earth, and hear the constant drip of water from the still-sodden cover of vegetation. As my eyes grew accustomed to the dark, a tangle of branches and trunks became slowly visible. Venturing a step or two into the woods, trying not to get my feet caught in brambles, I listened again. Hearing nothing but dripping, I was about to turn away, but there was a loud crash. A silhouette loomed before me, and I smelt elephant-musk. There was a bestial, warning grumble.

Screaming, I bolted out of the woods and across the fortunately empty road. I didn't stop running until I'd reached my car.

The next morning, I was woken by the telephone. It was Pamela and her voice shook.

"Roger, something terrible happened last night. The police are here... I think you'd better get in, straight away."

When I got into campus, I found that the protesters had returned, but they seemed rather subdued. There were also a couple of police cars parked in front of the entrance doors.

Going upstairs to the lab, I found the whole team gathered in front of a police officer. Kevin smiled weakly when he saw me, but concern remained etched on his face. Pamela's face was set in a grimace, and her arms were folded tight across her chest.

A body had been found early that morning by Nellie's keeper. It was lying outside the barn doors and the police had found a jemmy lying beside it, along with a bag that contained spray cans and anti-cloning stickers. The body itself had been crushed, apparently trampled and gored.

The police seemed certain that Nellie had done it, but this, Nellie's keeper had protested, was impossible; she had been locked in her barn all night, and the intruders hadn't managed to break in. But the killing did appear to have been done by an elephant, and what other elephant was there, but Nellie? Anyway, the police were going to wait for the post mortem before they made any further decisions.

Later, they interviewed each of us separately. I admitted I'd been in the building the previous evening – but I'd seen nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing they'd accept, anyway. The officer nodded severely, and showed me a 'photo of the victim. It was the young man who'd accosted me in the park.

We were allowed to go home after that, and I spent the afternoon pacing my flat. *Something you dug up*; Tubyaku's words kept reverberating through my head. We thought we'd collected only fossils, but suppose we'd also brought back something else?

I also remembered the feeling I'd had in the barn, the feeling that something had been hovering over Nellie. The same something, I knew, that had been patrolling the woods and scavenging dead bones. And now it had killed, but why? I thought of the ultrasound that Pamela had shown me, and I realized that it was obvious.

Fetching a pair of heavy cutters from the toolbox, I

went outside and threw them onto the back seat of my car. Ten minutes later, I was speeding along the motorway towards the campus.

When I got there, the police had gone and the labs were empty. This was fortunate, because I didn't want to explain why I was going into the basement with a pair of cutters. But I'd just severed the padlock to the cold room when I heard footsteps on the stairs. Turning away from the door, I tried to hide the cutters, but it was too late.

"What on earth are you doing, Roger?" Pamela demanded, her face wan in the bulb-light.

"It thought the intruder was threatening Nellie," I said, pulling open the heavy, steel doors. There was a huff of vapour, carried on a rush of icy air. I thought, fleetingly, of the boreal winds.

"It?" Pamela frowned, but there was a flicker of understanding in her eyes.

"The calf's father," I explained, and she looked at me as if I were crazy.

"Are you still taking your medication?" she asked quietly. I frowned, annoyed and strode into the cold room.

"Think about it," I snapped. "The intruder was *gored* as well as trampled."

"By Nellie."

"No, that's impossible. She hasn't any tusks."

"And what you're suggesting is *possible*?" she protested, but her eyes wavered again.

"That day on the steppe," I pressed, "when you rescued me – you saw it too, didn't you?"

"It could have been an hallucination..." she began, but her voice faltered.

I was already scanning the storage racks, reading off the serial numbers. Finding the right box, I pulled it out.

"Is this all there was?" I asked.

"The testicles, yes," she replied. "What are you going to do with that? Kevin'll have a fit."

"It's a pity about that," I said, pushing past her, and striding up the stairs. She didn't try to stop me.

The door to the incinerator was locked and I didn't have the key. I was about to shoulder it open, when Pamela produced her set.

"I'd rather unlock it than have you responsible for more criminal damage," she explained. "That man in Khatanga – you got these ideas from him, didn't you?"

"He opened my eyes to a few things, yes," I confirmed.

The incinerator room was a long, concrete affair whose roof was lined with innumerable pipes. It was lit only by a bulb over the door, which Pamela switched on, but the room's corners remained in shadow. It was, however, pleasantly warm.

Opening the incinerator, I placed the box inside and squirted accelerant over it, from a bottle I'd found in the caretaker's store.

"I thought," I said to Pamela as I worked, "that it was haunting *me*, but I was wrong. I think *that's* what Tubyaku was trying to tell me." Closing the door, I pressed the incinerator's ignition and there was a roar. Suddenly, I felt a blast of icy air and Pamela gripped my arm tight.

"In the corner," she moaned, gesturing. "In the corner!"

The huge, hairy, muscular, beast with black eyes and curved, yellowing tusks lumbered from the shadows. Its humped back brushed the ceiling as, trumpeting wildly, it charged.

"Oh, Christ!" Pamela screamed. Paralysed with terror, I screwed my eyes shut. I heard another trumpeting scream, but the next rush of wind, though cold, lacked bite.

I opened my eyes, and realized that the incinerator's roar had subsided to a low hiss. Pamela was still shaking.

"It m-melted," she stammered. "It melted away."

The last thing Tubyaku said to me was after the team had boarded the battered Aeroflot helicopter. He actually ran out onto the tarmac, and got me to open the helicopter door.

"Understand," he shouted, his hair blowing in the rotor-blades' wind, "It isn't a curse, to see the shadow. It's a curse not to see it."

It was only in the warmth of the Incinerator room, hugging Pamela tight, that I understood what he meant.

Matt Colborn's first published story was "The City in the Dusk" (issue 165), and this was followed by "The Proteus Egg" (issue 169) and "Nabunum's Folly" (issue 176). As this issue marks the successful merging of *Interzone* and *SF Nexus* one hundred issues ago, he is pleased to point out that this story "was inspired by a non-fiction piece in the *Ortygia House* issue (128/*SF Nexus* 4) entitled 'The Emergence of the Mammoth.' Written by Colin Greenland, it described the mammoth of the Siberians as an underground dweller that causes storms and earthquakes. I've been intrigued by the idea ever since."

interzone

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Breakfast at the FIR TREE DINER

**Jon
Courtenay
Grimwood**

Hector Moukél sat in the cafe and ate his breakfast. In between mouthfuls of soggy bacon he checked out the reason he was there. She'd been beautiful once. You could see it in the cheek bones and the thickness of her lips that pulled back from her severe face. A cheap plastic badge pinned over one full breast and *Maria*.

It was thankfully free of gold stars or places for those stars to go.

Raising his hand, Hector managed simultaneously to indicate his empty cup, smile politely and shrug his apologies for disturbing her while she took an order at another table.

"It's not good for you." She said this flatly, with his cup almost half full before she'd begun her warning. "You want to drink more water."

He nodded.

"Kidneys," she said. "Adults need to drink at least two litres of water a day. You need something else to eat?"

Hector glanced at his plate and forced himself not to smile. It was smeared with under-cooked egg, while a Rothko-like band of black showed where he'd dragged fried mushroom through a side order of baked beans.

His usual breakfast was a single coffee, made half Columbian half decaf, one croissant with strawberry jam, no butter and a glass of freshly-squeezed orange juice. None of which Marie's ramshackle cafe could have

provided had Hector bothered to ask, which he hadn't.

"Just the water," he said.

She smiled and he watched her limp towards the kitchen, dragging one foot behind her. He doubted if any one but him even remembered how Marie Cash got shot or who pulled the trigger, which happened to be him. The only time Hector ever missed his intended target.

Of course, he'd had another name then. And she'd been a new officer in the NYPD. Six weeks on the job to the day. Hector found it hard to get that fact out of his head.

"We'll bring the bulldozers in next week..." Two city types at the next table were talking to a local police officer about building regulations and the problems with unionized labour. They spoke loudly, with the self-importance of small men who own gas-guzzling SUVs and cheat on their wives, once a year every Christmas when whiskey gets the better of their cowardice. Both of the talkers were wearing new check shirts, not those elegant button-down things worn on Wall Street but outdoor garments, the kind with big red checks, made from stuff that feels like dog blanket.

They talked for effect, listening to themselves more than they listened to each other. And they left the policeman with a brief handshake, promises of imminent phone calls and without a backward glance.

"On the house," said Marie. In her hand was a glass of

mineral water, condensation rolling slowly down its sides.

"Thanks... Regulars of yours?"

He could see her weigh up his question, looking for a hidden meaning. Maybe she was just too worn down these days, because the Officer Marie Cash those news programmes had talked about read forensics reports for fun and carried a battered paperback of *Howl* in the back pocket of her NYPD chinos. Mind you, back then her life amounted to more than one threatened diner in the arse-end of nowhere.

"Do I know you?"

Hector started to shake his head and then changed his mind. "I've been in here before," he admitted. "I came for the fishing, round about the time you first opened this place... Thought I'd drop in, take a look at where they're planning to build the new houses."

"Yeah. A world of opportunity." Marie slapped down his check and glanced round her world, looking for plates to clear and orders to take.

"Those men?"

"Developers," she said, "from Dela V Enterprises." There was acid in her voice but Marie's attention was already on a boy by the far wall who kept glancing at the exit. A runner, most probably.

"Service not included," she told Hector from habit, leaving him to watch her soft ass as she headed off her runner, making not for his table but towards the exit, so she could block off his escape.

Good cops retained good-cop-instincts, even retired.

Dropping two notes and a handful of change, Hector stood up and straightened his coat. Fir Harbor wasn't really the place to wear black leather but the coat was older than Hector and sometimes standing out was a better disguise than trying to fit in.

Cold, said a voice high overhead.

Hungry.

They were simple thoughts. Mere flickers at the edge of the Hector's mind. For a second he watched the nearby harbour through the eyes of a gull and then released the bird's thoughts, feeling slightly sick.

"Focus," Hector told himself.

Wooden houses lined the narrow track along which he walked. Not made from painted board like in the towns around Saco but built with weather-bleached tree trunks, stripped bare. Axe blows showed how the pine had been hacked to length and grooved at either end so it could be stacked at right angles, one log on top of the other to make cabin walls.

An old-fashioned way to build and Hector liked Fir Harbor all the more for it. Of course, it helped that the town was off the beaten track. The kind of place where the occasional Boston patrician might own a summer house but local laws worked to ensure that most of the original fishing families could afford to remain. Not remotely the kind of area suitable for turning into a Dela V Gated Community, whatever garish signs along both sides of the track might proclaim.

"A world of opportunity... Yeah right." Sucking at his teeth in disgust, Hector extracted a Glock from the back of

his belt and checked its readout. The 1896 broom-handle Mauser, one of the greatest hand guns of all time featured only one screw and a handful of working parts. The Glock he'd found waiting for him in a left-luggage locker at Grand Central had well over 150 working parts, fooler loops to get it through airports and more processing power than the computer which had launched China's first moon mission.

It still fired like a piece of shit.

The two developers were down on the docks, hired fishing rods in hand, arguing with the owner of a clinker-built boat over who should pay for the fuel needed to refill its Volvo diesel.

"Alan Parker?"

"Who wants to know?"

Hector shot the speaker though his forehead, taking out his colleague immediately afterwards and watching their two bodies hit the water more or less together. He left the fisherman standing where he was.

On his way up the hill Hector stopped off at the café to check a hand-written sign in the window; it was advertising for a short-order cook.

* * *

Agent Gillespie liked cats, that was one thing in his favour. Probably the only thing.

Against him was the fact he'd broken into Hector Moukef's study and was currently doing his best to open a Matisse over the fireplace, where intelligence had told him Hector kept all his secrets.

The Agency was wrong because Hector kept his secrets in his head, along with a tally of those he'd killed and those he loved, there being far more of the first than the second.

Ninety-eight to one, at the last count.

And even if David Gillespie had been able to open the safe he'd have found nothing worth the effort his agency had expended in getting five different operatives into Mr Moukef's party.

Certainly no clue as to who the crime boss known as *El Fusil* intended to target next or why his hit men were invariably Chinese.

"Fish," demanded the cat.

"Shush..." Absent-mindedly Agent Gillespie tried to scratch the cat behind its ears and jumped when the Bengal promptly turned round and bit him.

"Fish..." It repeated through a mouthful of Gillespie's wrist, reinforcing its demand with a vicious rake of one back leg. "Now."

Two floors below, Hector nodded. "Okay," he agreed. "You get fish." And inside the study his cat jumped down from the over-mantle and left Agent Gillespie to battle the recalcitrant safe, letting itself out through a tall window that opened onto a narrow ledge.

One floor below Hector, brightness splintered from a mirror ball, dusting those on the dance floor with a camouflage of light. Music pumped from hidden speakers and a foam machine vomited froth, turning his guests into the glitz equivalent of contestants in a wet tee-shirt contest.

"What?"

Elaine Markham-Moukef had a million-dollar smile, something her husband knew for a fact having only just paid for it. She also had the body of a twenty-five year old and he'd provided that too.

"I said, *I'm going to feed the cat...* God knows –" he nodded towards two men laughing so loud he could hear them from the balcony – "It's not like they can't manage without me."

Both were clients and one, Hector's banker, had his arm wrapped so tightly around the shoulders of a teenage waitress he was able to reach a breast. Hector paid retainers to both men, despite his awareness that neither would stand by him when the time came. They were just two of many reasons he wanted to retire.

"You're not enjoying your party?" Elaine looked at her husband oddly.

"How could I not?" Without thinking, he patted his wife's bottom and tried not to mind when he saw her scowl. Her latest lover was somewhere down there in the crowd. A tanned young thug who still needed to decide if his best route to riches lay with his boss's wife or with Isabel, Elaine's teenage mistake and Hector's step-daughter.

Angelo had fucked them both, Hector knew this from the way Isabel went red every time she saw the man and Elaine's behaviour had changed in bed. It was the little things that gave his wife away, like her new habit of grabbing his hips to yank him into her when she'd always avoided that kind of thing before.

"Cat," Hector reminded himself. "But first some calls."

"It's New Year!"

"Only here," said Hector, "elsewhere it's just a normal day..."

Agent Gillespie was good, Hector had to give him that. Without the cat it would have been next to impossible to get details on whichever agent had come calling, so free was Hector's study from carelessly discarded hairs, skin flakes or sundry biological scatter. As it was, the cat still had skin fragments and blood stuck to one back claw and Hector had a desk full of cheap and dirty DNA kits, the kind bought by mail order.

Well done.

Hector tried to make his pleasure clear, sending both a feeling of warmth and a signal for fish, which he translated as a mixture of taste and smell. And then, having matched the DNA reading to Gillespie's name, Hector opened a connection to Beijing and bought himself two bodies.

At the same time he began to draft his new will.

To my beloved wife Elaine I leave my house in Shanghai, my island in the West Indies and my yacht. To my step-daughter Isabel I leave \$200 million, to be held in trust until she reaches the age of twenty-one...

It seemed best to start covering his tracks.

* * *

In the beginning there was light. A white wall of the stuff that rushed towards him roaring like a waterfall. People who'd never tried this got it wrong and talked about *tunnels, heaven and fragments of eternity* until the words

became numb and lost what little meaning they had.

It was such a cliché, coming back from the dead.

The floppy-haired Chinese boy wasn't sure quite how he recognized the flowers but he did; or maybe it was their scent he recognized, sickly like bad cologne. Vase after vase lining a long corridor along which he walked.

Since it was unlikely so many flowers had been grown on site the obvious conclusion was that they'd been cultured on Earth and flown to *Nearside*. That took serious money. Something Lady de la Vecchia had in plenty.

"You know why you're here?"

Hector nodded. That is, the tightly-focused sliver of Hector's will that currently occupied the teenage body of an ex-convict did the nodding. Without knowing why he did it, the Chinese boy swept a lock of hair back from his forehead and pouted prettily.

Eyes pale as Arctic ice met those of the man questioning him. George LeGrange had a impressive title but the boy had made a point of forgetting it. Although words like *executive* and *president* tugged at the edge of his mind.

During the flight the boy had undergone a series of retro-virus tests and full body scans. Mostly repeats of those he'd been given by a Chinese military doctor before he was executed, made at the request of *El Fusil*.

Hector ran a very thorough operation.

"My Lady..."

An elderly woman looked round crossly from the chair in which she sat. "Can't you see I'm on the screen?"

LeGrange took a step back, almost as if he'd been slapped. Although it was doubtful if Lady de la Vecchia even registered the man's stammered apology, because all her attention was on a huge looking glass on the wall in front of her.

"That fool butler," she told the teenager who stared out from the ornate Murano frame.

"Poor Auntie..." The blonde reflection was sympathetic. "It must be so boring all alone up there."

"At least I'm safe." Lady de la Vecchia said it sharply. This was an old argument, one that had been played out many times before and always to the same ending.

"It's not as dangerous down here as you think," insisted the girl.

Lady de la Vecchia snorted. "I get the news," she said. "Riots in North India and a coup in Jakarta. As for *'fluenza*... What's the death toll now?" The woman scowled into her great niece's silence until it became obvious she wanted an answer.

"One hundred and eighty million."

"I'm sure it's more."

"One eighty," the girl said firmly. "Less than two percent of the planet's population."

Lady de la Vecchia sighed. "You're so like your father," she said sadly. "You think everything can be reduced to ratios, percentages and figures..."

"It can," the girl said with a smile. "And I'd better let you go," she added slyly, her eyes flicking over her great aunt's shoulder to where the Chinese boy stood. "Since it seems your Christmas present has finally arrived."

Before the woman could answer, her glass went dead and she suddenly found herself staring at her own reflection.

tion. It was more haunted than she remembered, less beautiful. Seeing her niece always had that effect on Lady de la Vecchia.

"Leave him." Her order was for Mr LeGrange.

"My Lady..."

"I'll be quite safe, won't I?"

The Chinese boy smiled vapidly.

"See," Lady de la Vecchia said. "We're going to get on just fine..."

One of the first ring orbitals, *Nearside* had been built well over a hundred years before in a style that was high-Soviet. As if a throw-away rough by Rodchenko of a circle slashed through with black had somehow been translated into intricate plans for the ultimate penthouse. One so removed from the real world that looking down on people now required a telescope.

"You like my home?"

"Beautiful," said the boy, taking a long look.

No walls except at either side and few places to hide a body. No cameras, at least none that were obvious. And apart from the woman and LeGrange, he seemed to be the only other person on *Nearside*.

There was, however, an original Kandinsky, plus a Chagall stolen decades earlier from the Louvre. And a huge Bokhara runner that thinned into the distance, its impressiveness only slightly ruined by the inevitable upward curve of *Nearside's* floor.

The overall effect was as if removal men had stacked the contents of an infinite number of auction houses into a corridor, one so long that quantum mechanics eventually brought it back on itself. The reality was far simpler. *Nearside* was simply a hollow ring around a spindle, with usable gravity restricted to the inside of the ring's outer edge.

"Oraboros," said the boy.

Lady de la Vecchia stared at him.

"I was trying to think what this reminded me of..." He gestured at the long run of carpet vanishing beneath its own horizon. "It's like a gallery in a museum... I went to a museum once," he added, catching her glance. "A man took me."

"Is that so."

The boy nodded.

She had the breasts of a someone much younger. Although it probably helped that they were naturally small and the gravity on *Nearside* was set to point-six that of Earth. Her stomach was flat and she obviously worked out daily in a gym.

"What do you think?" she asked, stepping out of her dress.

"Good." The boy took another look. "Beautiful..."

Lady de la Vecchia patted the seat beside her. "Come sit by me," she said, adding, "What did LeGrange say your name was?"

The boy shrugged. "I don't think he did."

Her hunger was as impressive as her total disregard for any needs the Chinese boy might have had. Having locked her legs around him, Lady de la Vecchia simply ground the boy into near tears as she hunted down an orgasm, finding it as her nails dug new moons into his lacerated back.

"Done?" the boy asked.

And his reason for being there nodded, her eyes still closed and breath ragged in the back of her up-turned throat. He could have ended her life with a single blow, but then it would have taken Lady de la Vecchia eight minutes to die, mostly from slow suffocation and that would have been bad for *El Fusil* (clean kills being Hector's specialty).

On the boy's wrist was a silver watch, tonneau case/Swiss movement, the strap of which was the hair from an elephant, a tail hair easily long enough to wrap several times around his wrist. Untying this, the Chinese boy pulled it free from the watch and threaded one end under a ring he wore on his left hand, knotting it tight before wrapping the other around the case of the watch, finishing off by tucking both watch and hair into the palm of his hand.

Now all he had to do was see if LeGrange was in the area.

"I need a pee," said the boy.

Lady de la Vecchia sighed. "Turn right at the Japanese screen," she said, "then down the spiral staircase..."

"Okay."

By the time he padded his way back up the steel staircase and along a length of the Bokhara, Lady de la Vecchia was almost asleep, one thin arm thrown above her head, the other draped decorously across her abdomen. Although she opened her eyes long enough to check it was him.

"Find it okay?"

"Sure," said the boy, "very swish."

"You're sweet," Lady de la Vecchia said sleepily. "Everyone probably tells you that."

"Yeah." Reaching down, he massaged her temples with his thumbs, slow circles that pulled slightly at her skin. After her temples, he started on the sides of her jaw at the point where it joined her skull.

"That's nice."

"Pressure point massage. I learnt it in Soho," he said, "from a Malay hairdresser."

"New York?"

"London," the boy said, "the real Soho."

Lady de la Vecchia sighed. "I've never been," she said. "London always seemed so dangerous."

"Everywhere's dangerous," said the boy. "Even here." And with that he broke her neck as cleanly as he could manage.

Having unravelled his make-shift garotte, the boy gripped the watch in one hand and folded his other into a fist, so that the cord exited from between his second and third finger. Then he looped the garotte around her already-broken neck and yanked until it could go no tighter.

Only then did he turn on the looking glass.

He saw the blonde girl's eyes widen at his nakedness and then her face steadied, her mouth hardening. "Okay," she said, "I'll tell your boss we've got a deal."

"LeGrange..."

His call echoed along the corridor, the boy padding along behind it.

There were Venetian sideboards covered with Murano paperweights. Two enormous Chinese vases with rough approximations of the French royal arms. A suit of Samurai armour hollow as history, complete with lobster-tail helmet and matched daisho.

"Come on, I know you're here."

As the boy walked, he held his stolen katana at a slant behind him, so that its blade flowed like an extension of his arm. The fragment of Hector still focused behind the boy's eyes had no idea if this was the right way to carry a blade because it had never practiced *iaido* but this way felt familiar from the hundred times Hector had seen it done just so in some Samurai epic.

"You." The voice behind the boy was sharp. "What's going on?"

"Stuff," said the boy, watching the man draw his gun. "Stuff?"

"Yeah. You know. Bad stuff..."

A glance at the sword. Relief at the sight of the clean blade.

"Oh no," the boy said calmly. "I didn't use this. I strangled her."

* * *

White light rushing towards him like a waterfall, trailing fragments of eternity. It was such a...

Hector jack-knifed in his pod, fingers scrabbling at the jelly. Without intending to he opened his mouth to scream and promptly swallowed a mouthful of slime, coming awake to a coughing fit that tightened his chest and almost choked him.

"Steady."

Ignoring the voice, Hector spat slime until his mouth was dry. Only then did he allow himself to look down. He was unaugmented, out of condition but enough in control of his mind to know that he was completely himself. Apart from the replacement body, that was.

Cars, dozens of them were parked up in rusting rows. A platoon of petrol pumps leant drunkenly against a breeze-block wall, trailing hoses that mostly ended in jagged cuts. Quite what anyone would want with their nozzles was hard to guess; but they must have some value or local kids wouldn't have bothered to steal them.

He was in a garage of sorts.

A single Matsui womb wired direct into the mains, with a cheap cane-alcohol generator and a bank of batteries alongside in case the electricity went down.

"Tekit easy."

"Tekit...?"

"Easy."

"Yeah..." Hector took a look around and discovered that the old woman who'd resurrected him was perturbed enough by his coughing to have lifted her shades. So now they balanced above a ploughed skull of pulled-back braids.

"Lemi see."

Rough fingers turned Hector's face towards the window and pulled down his lower eyelids, making him blink at the sunlight.

"You know who you are?"

He nodded.

"You no *merasme*?"

Hector didn't think so.

"Okay. Maybe you feel shit for a while. So we stay here for a little."

"Good idea." Only what he didn't know... That is, what Hector couldn't yet remember was where *here* was meant to be. Some place tropical, obviously. Where petrol had been available recently enough for someone to have thought it worth stacking cars. A town which had regular electricity but brown-outs still happened enough for back-up systems to be necessary. Hector could read the clues. Unfortunately, he was feeling too wasted to make much sense of them.

"Where am I?"

"What you think... Trinidad."

Hector sighed.

The woman, who never offered her hand and for whose name Hector was careful not to ask, offered him some jeans, a tee-shirt, a false passport and a gun. The gun was worse than cheap, it was a replica drilled out to take .38. All anyone could say in its favour was that it came ready loaded with red-dot ceramic, a fact obvious to any person looking at the cylinder face on.

"Sense come soon..." The woman sounded almost sympathetic.

"Good," said Hector shortly, pulling himself out of a pod that sucked at his nakedness with its bastard mix of mud and glue and rolling himself over the side, only to discover he had the legs of a new-born colt.

"Tekit slow."

Yeah. He'd worked that out. Swapping *like for like* was said to be much easier. Hector's wife had been through three of her own bodies in the 15 years he'd known her. Each one the same age as the one she'd taken before. And it seemed to Hector that she really did intend to stay 25 for the rest of her life. Whereas he –

Until now...

Most of those who tried swapping body types thought they could handle it until they woke and found themselves someone else, different face, different body, sometimes different race or sex. In another incarnation Hector had talked to a New York psychiatrist about the resulting phobias and been surprised to hear that it was the change of eyes which invariably caused the biggest problem.

Looking into one's own eyes only to see someone else stare back.

The answer to this was so obvious that Hector found it hard to believe no one had adopted it before. He simply had his own eyes cloned at a very discreet clinic in Beijing, one so discreet he mostly used it to store corpses, the ones he'd later aminate with tightly-focused slivers of his own purpose and send out to kill and die, permanently this time.

Hector doubted if his wife even noticed the new eyes and he certainly hadn't. Of course, it probably helped that around this time he'd had a fresh face. One of the joys of face work being that no matter how different the donor originally looked, the face still ended up looking like you once it got stretched across bone.

"Meh boy," the Trinidadian woman said. "I'm gone. Okay." Which Hector translated as, *I don't really know who you are but it's time for me to leave. I got paid to pod you, not sit around afterwards while you stare blankly at a wall like some idiot.*

"Sure," agreed Hector, then surprised himself by asking. "You know a good bar...?"

Clear bottle, blue and yellow label. He chose from a board with pictures of half a dozen different beers. Mostly brands that had gone global. Sipping direct from the bottle, he waited for the old woman to finish the Carib he'd bought her and then smiled as she stood to go.

One Carib gave way to another. Afternoon slipping into early evening. And with it came girls hustling for business.

"Hey, I've seen you around. Right? You're on holiday..."

The voice had huge eyes and a body that belonged on the cover of *Dance Night VII*. Cut off jeans bulged at the thigh with what could be a packet of cigarettes but was just as likely to be a swipe card reader.

"No." Hector emptied his bottle with a single swig. "Not holiday."

"Work then, you're visiting for work..."

Turning his attention to the girl, Hector let a life's worth of self-loathing do its job. And when the kid stepped back, Hector slipped from his stool, casually folded the paper he'd been reading and walked away without glancing behind him.

The yacht was where the paper said it was, taking up one whole side of a jetty in Port of Spain. *Gin Palace*, Hector re-read the name his wife had given their yacht with resignation, then went to talk to a sailor guarding the gang plank.

"I've got an appointment with Mr Moukef."

The white uniform looked doubtful.

"You could check," suggested Hector.

The rating's mistake was to look down while he freed his radio. Lowering the unconscious sailor to the jetty, Hector dragged his body under the gangplank and rolled it out of sight.

His walk towards the family quarters was purposeful and it helped that Hector knew exactly where he was going. His crew might have noticed the stranger but his confidence turned aside their interest. No one questioned Hector's right to be there until Angelo answered his knock on the family door.

"Yeah," said Angelo. His voice was dismissive. "What do you want?"

Hector took in the crop-haired thug as if seeing him for the first time. A diamond ear-ring, light-weight Armani suit and a bulge under his right shoulder only slightly more discreet than the bulge in the man's jeans.

His step-daughter's original opinion had been right. Angelo really was a jerk.

"What do I want?" Hector paused to think about it. "This," he said, a palm to the chin becoming an elbow in the throat and a quick knee to the groin. Anything else was redundant but Hector still shoved Angelo back through the door, then spun him round and kicked the dazed man hard between the legs.

His wife Angelo could have, but Isabel was still a kid.

"That's for being a shit," he told the floor but Angelo had long since stopped listening.

Beyond the first door was a second, leading through to a study. As Hector expected, it was unlocked and a thick-set, elegantly dressed man sat waiting at a desk, his eyes on a ship's clock.

"You're late."

"What do you expect?" Hector shrugged. "If you forget to supply a watch..."

For some reason this answer seemed to amuse Mr Moukef.

"You know who you are?"

"Of course I know." Hector took a look at the man in front of him, followed by a second look as he fixed the moment into his memory. It wasn't at all like looking at someone else. In fact, despite their obvious difference in age and fitness, it was like staring into a mirror more real than any which showed a mere reflection.

"And if I refuse to go through with this?"

Hector pulled the revolver from its holster and checked that its safety catch was off before he spun the cylinder, watching it wobble like some cheap roulette wheel.

"Refuse what... To retire?"

Mr Moukef smiled. "So," he said, "You really are me. Not like all the other times." He was talking to himself but, in so doing, he talked to Hector. To the mirror self that occupied a body into which his full identity had so recently been imprinted.

The two men stared at each other. One in his summer-weight suit of white silk, with the perfect skin of the ever-rich, while the other wore old Levis and a tee-shirt, his flesh jelly pale with that just-podded look.

"I don't get it," Hector said.

"No," said Mr Moukef, "and I'm sure you'll agree. That's the point. You don't get any of it. You're me without the money or the yacht, the face grafts, wife or the step brat. My DNA isn't your DNA. As you, I can't even access my own bank accounts because our fingerprints differ."

"*But our eyes are the same...*" Hector thought about that for a second, then shook his head. "No," he said, "two points of difference. Not enough to be noticed, just enough not to pass a scan."

The man behind the desk looked pleased.

Hector wasn't too sure what he was meant to do next. A bit of him felt it might be polite if he allowed his other self enough time to make a brief speech. Unless, of course, the *old him* really meant it about refusing to retire. In which case Mr Hector Moukef would exist twice, in differing bodies, perfect in memory right up to the point that he underwent...

Hector didn't allow himself to think about it. He just cranked back the hammer on his cheap revolver and put the gun to Mr Moukef's head. Less than a second later he was alone in the world again.

* * *

The man in the café sat and ate his breakfast. In between mouthfuls of soggy bacon he skimmed the *Arcadia Tribune*. A local fisherman was still unable to remember any

details of who might have killed two out-of-town developers. A plan to rebuild Fir Harbor had been withdrawn by the new chair of Dela V Enterprises. And according to a small box-out in *situations vacant*, the Fir Tree Diner was still looking for a short-order cook and the pay was still appalling.

Raising his hand, the man who was no longer Hector managed simultaneously to indicate his empty cup, smile politely and shrug his apologies for disturbing Marie while she took an order at another table.

"You been in here before?"

He shook his head.

"You sure..." Marie began to say, but her gaze was caught by a paperback copy of *Howl* lying open on top of a battered cookbook, the front of which read *101 New England Recipes*.

"You read Ginsberg?" Marie sounded surprised.

"Sure," said the man. "When I'm not too busy making chowder."

Jon Courtenay Grimwood's only previous story in *Interzone* was the short-short "Bug" (issue 143 – that issue also contained an interview with him). He is also the author of six novels, all set in approximately the same version of the future as this story. Most recently, *Pashazade: The First Arabesk* and *Effendi: The Second Arabesk* have taken his story-telling into the pressure-cooker atmosphere of the police-procedural in Alexandria. The conclusion of this trio of future detective novels, *Felaheen: The Third Arabesk*, is available in May 2003.

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The genres of science fiction, fantasy, and horror, unlike the genre of detective fiction, rarely focus on the process of solving a murder. Perhaps that is why people in the field are not very good at it.

The homicide under investigation here is the much-discussed “death of horror” that occurred in the 1990s: a robust, expanding category of literature abruptly and precipitously shrank in dimensions and almost vanished from sight. Publishers dropped their horror lines, bookstores removed their horror sections, magazines and small presses collapsed, major authors couldn’t get their novels into print. Battered survivors of the holocaust surveyed the scene of the crime and began to search for the perpetrators. And likely suspects were not difficult to find: terrible writers and opportunistic publishers.

Robert Weinberg, in *Horror of the 20th Century*, outlines what became the standard theory of the crime:

When horror sold well, too many companies took sales figures as evidence that anything published with the word horror in the title would sell... Bookstore racks were filled with tasteless, poorly written horror novels that should never have been printed... Mediocre books squeezed the good novels off the shelves and when customers stopped buying the mediocre novels, there was nothing left to sell.

In a 2002 interview cited by Paula Guran in her article for *Locus Online*, “Tribal Stand,” Dan Simmons became one of many to echo the same argument:

Horror solved its ghetto problem through the simple act of destroying its own genre – greedy publishers, sloppy editors and lazy writers producing so much junk and in such quantities that “Gresham’s Law” kicked into effect. The bad drove out the good. Then the whole genre imploded.

It seems a plausible solution to the mystery, and one envisions the good horror writers, in the role of upstanding police inspectors, slipping the handcuffs on the accused criminals – bad writers and their partners in crime, bad publishers. However, like other snap judgments rendered in the opening pages of detective stories, there is something suspicious about the whole scenario, providing an opening for a more astute detective to probe deeper and poke some holes in the official theory.

One might explain doubts about the theory’s validity in this fashion. If you accuse someone of committing a crime, you are necessarily asserting that the

same person could have prevented the crime; if Colonel Mustard killed the victim in the ballroom with the candlestick, he could have kept the victim alive by declining to wield the candlestick in that locale. If talentless writers and unscrupulous publishers killed horror, they could have kept it alive by doing something differently.

So, how could horror have been saved? All across America, incompetent writers should have said to themselves, “Well, I can see that writers might make lot of money by writing horror, but honestly, the horror I’m writing or could write isn’t very good. So, to ensure the long-term survival of the genre, I must resolve to stay away from horror and instead exercise my meagre talents in fields where there is less money to be made.”

And all across America, avaricious publishers should have said to themselves, “Well, I can see that publishers

might make a lot of money by publishing horror, but honestly, the stuff I have on hand or could attract isn’t very good. So, to ensure the long-term survival of the genre, I must resolve to not publish horror and instead publish other forms of fiction which are less likely to be profitable.”

The only question to ask is: and on what planet were these decisions supposed to have occurred?

The “crime” said to have been committed here is a normal, natural response to a common situation. *Of course*, when a genre becomes successful, hordes of inept writers will rush into the field in search of income; *of course*, when a genre becomes successful, hordes of publishers will flood the market with whatever examples of the genre they can lay their hands on, no matter how inferior they are. To rail against the people who do these things is silly; it is railing against the entire capitalist system, railing against human nature itself.

And such a normal, natural response to a common situation *cannot*, simply cannot, destroy a literary genre. If it could, then every literary genre that ever garnered popularity would be swiftly driven to extinction. And this hasn’t occurred.

Consider some precedents. In the 1950s, the noteworthy success of a new publishing category, science fiction, led indiscriminating publishers to put out novels by some pretty bad writers – works like Jerry Sohl’s *Point Ultimate*, Stanley Mullen’s *Kinsmen of the Dragon*, and Allen A. Adler’s *Mach 1: A Story of Planet Ionus* that are remembered today only because Damon Knight so delightfully eviscerated them in reviews reprinted in his *In Search of Wonder* (1956). In the 1970s, the newly prominent and profitable genre of heroic fantasy again engendered innumerable atrocities, such as the various trilogies and Robert E. Howard pastiches churned out by Andrew J. Offutt that are now read only by people who are paid to read them (as I was when I was commissioned to epitomize Offutt’s career for a reference book). Please note, however, that these execrable effluences did not kill science fiction, and they did not kill fantasy; the markets may have contracted a bit after the booms, as markets invariably do, but both genres endured their Invasions from Mediocrity and have retained a wide audience.

There is no “Gresham’s Law” of literature; bad novels do not drive out the good ones; the appearance of many awful books in a genre cannot destroy that genre. It can be proven by example after example.

We reach the moment in the story where the astute detective confronts

Who Didn't Kill Horror?

Gary Westfahl

the less-than-astute police inspector and announces that the accused persons could not have committed the crime – there were no bullets in their guns! Lousy writers and imprudent publishers did not have the ability to kill horror. One might properly criticize them for many reasons, but they are not, they cannot be, guilty of this particular crime.

So, if armies of inept writers and stupid publishers didn't kill horror, who is actually the criminal here? I was afraid you were going to ask that question, and I've already confessed to representing a field that isn't especially adept in solving crimes. So, I might respond to the question by taking refuge in two explanations rarely found in detective fiction but often invoked in official death certificates: "unknown causes" and "natural causes."

Unknown causes? The factors that govern the popularity of literary genres are multifarious and, despite abundant research on the part of publishers and others, still poorly understood. The phenomenon involves so many variables as to be governed by chaos theory and hence may be beyond rational explanation. Certain types of writing sometimes sell very well and sometimes sell poorly; the fluctuations may be mild, and they may be extreme. One might confront the issue of "who killed horror?" simply by stating that during the 1980s, for some unknowable reason, horror became successful, and during the 1990s, for some unknowable reason, horror suddenly became unsuccessful.

Still, in forensic medicine and in literary criticism, "unknown causes" is always the last resort. We are the pattern-seeking animals, and we don't wish to concede that certain situations resist the imposition of explanatory patterns.

We are left, then, with the possibility of "natural causes." Literary genres can die naturally, even at an early age, if they are not properly nourished and supported. There is nothing inevitable in the growth of a child to robust adulthood, and nothing inevitable in the growth of a fledgling genre into a fixture of the publishing scene. For a time, horror writers may have been victimized by a sense of entitlement: science fiction got big in the 1950s, fantasy got big in the 1970s, and now it was manifestly horror's turn. So to correspond to the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, you establish the Horror Writers of America, and to correspond to the World Science Fiction Conventions and World Fantasy Conventions, you establish the World Horror Conventions, and you await your destined elevation to a co-equal status. But it takes hard work to

keep a genre vibrant and expanding; in book publishing, there's a particular need for dynamic, insightful editors who can attract good works, package them well, and articulate their virtues in introductions and promotional material. The growth of science fiction in the 1950s owed much to editors like Donald A. Wollheim and Ian and Betty Ballantine, just as the growth of fantasy in the 1970s owed much to editors like Lin Carter and Judy-Lynn del Rey. Who were the heroic editors of horror? Names like Charles L. Grant and Ellen Datlow come to mind, but perhaps they lacked the frenzied fanaticism, the single-minded devotion to a genre, that distinguished their science fiction and fantasy predecessors.

Still, this line of thought leads back to reckless allegations, with editors now accused not of improvident overproduction but of lazy or inadequate promotion; and, quite possibly, not even the most herculean of labours could have kept the patient alive.

Continuing to consider natural causes, we are driven to dark and disturbing suppositions. Perhaps, there is something about the genre of horror that is inherently contrary to modern sensibilities. Perhaps, horror is a form of narrative, like westerns, pirate stories, and jungle adventures, that is by its nature becoming outdated, a problem that cannot be solved by superficial transformations to accommodate contemporary sensibilities – such as putting vampires on motorcycles or maximizing the gross-out factor. Perhaps, with certain exceptions, horror is a genre that fewer and fewer contemporary readers will appreciate, and its short-lived popularity was only a bizarre aberration, a fad comparable to hula hoops and pet rocks that could not endure. Perhaps, therefore, it was only natural that horror died in the 1990s, and it was an event that could not have been avoided or postponed by suppressing its weaker practitioners or developing more judicious publication strategies.

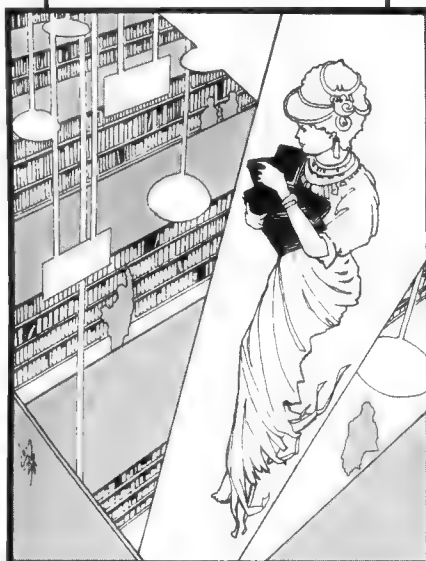
It is never pleasant to ponder the possibility that one's favourite category of literature, the genre one has devoted a lifetime to, might be destined to shrink and fade away. I have entertained such speculations about science fiction: since its growth was fuelled largely by a monomyth of humanity conquering space which has now been invalidated, its writers may now be left to hopelessly present the tired old dream to unresponsive audiences or to squander their talents in crafting alternate histories and other frivolities. Commentators on fantasy can similarly wax pessimistic regarding the long-term prospects of a genre constantly on the verge of trapping itself in the stultify-

ing cul-de-sac of Tolkien pastiches. And yet, envisioning the imminent demise of one's genre can be stimulating and productive, as it might inspire writers to do some soul-searching, envision new avenues, push the envelopes, forge into virgin territories. Certainly, the much-heralded "revival" of hard science fiction stems from writers who are scouring the technical journals looking for some experimental finding or new theory that might inspire stories fundamentally different from the stories that science fiction has been telling for decades; certainly, authors like China Miéville are visibly searching for new approaches to fantasy. Thoughtful lamentations about the impending demise of a literary genre, paradoxically, might bring new life to the form.

Horror, it seems, is working hard to avoid this sort of reflective introspection, preferring instead to deal with its problems by finger-pointing and name-calling. Guran's essay for *Locus Online* was spectacularly venomous in labelling the past and present horror writers not meeting her high standards as "hacks," "bottom-feeders," "lemmings," "wannabes," and "mud-whiners." Perhaps there is something about these people that is genuinely irritable; I cannot say, having had little exposure to their fiction and their commentaries. But to return to the point made earlier, bad writers cannot kill, cannot even damage, a form of writing. To say that they can is to assign them too much power, to elevate them to a level of significance that they do not deserve, to feed the inflated egos that Guran so passionately complains about. Further, while people who find themselves in troubling times may find it comforting to locate and castigate alleged villains, such activities serve only to slander innocent people and avoid productive engagement with the real sources of the problem.

So, in confronting what happened to horror, we arrive at a conclusion rarely observed in the literature of detective fiction: the detective eliminates all the obvious suspects and announces to the interested parties, "Something much more complicated than a simple murder is going on here, so we must launch a thoroughgoing investigation of the various factors that might have contributed to the victim's death." In sum, determining who – if anybody – killed horror does not demand the services of police officers or detectives to find a perpetrator; instead, it requires a doctor of forensic medicine who is prepared to conduct an extensive autopsy and diligently search for the true cause or causes of death. On the basis of my cursory examinations, such a figure in the field of horror has not yet emerged.

Gary Westfahl



REVIEWED

Three History Lessons

Neil Jones

You may find this hard to believe, but reviewing can be hard work – and I don't just mean the writing. Some books are much less fun to read than others. The bottom line is, I read for pleasure; although I also want the book to deliver a lot more than entertainment – for instance, intellectual stimulation, a degree of enlightenment, even now and again that old sf staple, a sense of wonder. It's true that some great fiction is hard-going; but it's the flipside of that which seems increasingly to underlie a lot of sf, American as well as British, i.e. that hard-going automatically equates with rewarding. Which means that far too often these days the actual reading experience can be about as pleasurable as undergoing serious dental work.

So, as a reviewer, to have three books I was actually expecting to enjoy – one because of what it was about, but the other two simply on the track records of the writers involved – was a real joy. Plus there are the history links.

Let's start with some future history: *Diplomatic Immunity* by Lois McMaster Bujold (Baen Books, \$25), the latest in her Miles Vorkosigan series. Although right now the US and UK are firmly allied in world affairs, Bujold fares very differently in these two English-speaking nations. In the US she's won award after award – is it four Hugos now? – and is a bestseller, but over here she struggles to find shelf-space. Frankly, I'm mystified as to why she's made so little impact in Britain – is it just down to publishing misjudgments, or is her humane optimism simply not in sync with the British sf market? Whatever, it's the UK's loss. She's turned out a string of worthwhile books, the bulk of them featuring her handicapped genius

hero, Miles Vorkosigan, and, while they might appear from the blurbs to fall into the sterile "military sf" category, her storytelling and characterizational abilities and her warm humanity lift them far above that into a category all of their own.

This latest novel follows *Komarr* and *A Civil Campaign*, which dealt with Miles's courtship of Ekaterin Vorsoisson. It's a year or so on from there, and Miles and Ekaterin are married, with two soon-to-be tots safely casked and due for delivery. En route from a honeymoon on Earth, he, in his office of Imperial Auditor (read trouble-shooter with extraordinary powers for his interstellar state, the hi-tech semi-feudal Barrayaran Empire) is diverted to deal with a crisis: a stand-off

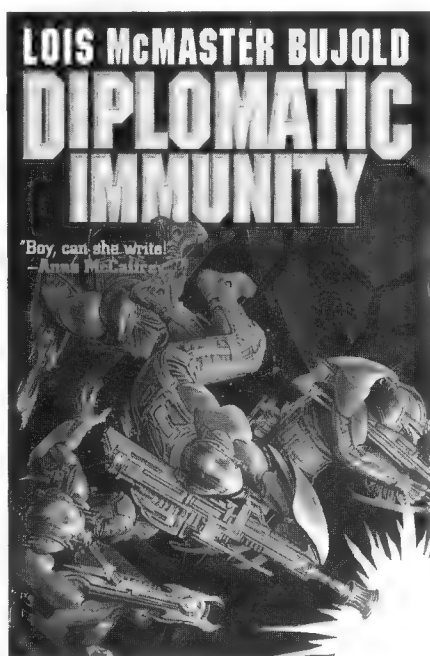
between a flotilla of Barrayaran military ships and the civil authorities of Graf Station in Quaddiespace. Naturally, when Miles arrives, complications multiply and tension ratchets.

At once, Bujold loyalists will guess that she is revisiting the quaddies (adapted to live in zero-G, with an extra pair of arms where we would have legs) of her earlier (200 years earlier as far as her timeline is concerned) award-winning *Falling Free*. There's also a connection to Barrayar's galactic antagonist, the formidable Cetagandan Empire, and its inscrutable bio-engineered ruling caste. Plus, on Graf Station, Miles encounters old friends from earlier works in the series, the quaddie Nicol, and his one-time lieutenant, the ex-mercenary hermaphrodite, Bel Thorne. Bujold's nexus-space future, while extending through many star-systems, seems undeniably prone to the sort of convenient coincidences that, while they strain credulity, do help to power up a good story.

Even Bujold addicts are likely to find the first section of the book, where she sets all the pieces out on the board, rather pedestrian. But they will trust that the story will eventually kick into top gear and make the wait well worthwhile – which is very much the case here. She's developed her future history steadily over the years, and it's impressive that she has not contradicted the details she laid down in her earliest works. The Cetagandan Empire, for example, once just an off-stage multi-stellar villain-state, blossomed into an intricate feudal-futuristic, biology-driven/obsessed society – and the Cetagandan connection serves this novel very well.

Bujold's Vorkosigan novels tend to alternate between the ambitious (hefty) and the more straightforward (slimmer) just-good-yarns. This belongs in the latter camp and it's merely good rather than top-of-her-form Bujold. As such, it's not the best way to begin an acquaintanceship with her work. Still, it's engaging, inventive and decidedly readable. And, since Bujold's greatest strength has always lain in creating warmly human characters we get to know and care about, such as Miles and his ever-widening acquaintances, meeting them here, older and with more trials to undergo, is a definite plus for this book.

I'm with the Americans on Bujold. As long as she keeps writing them like this, I'll keep buying them.



Now a little history of the what-if variety. Of course it's been around for a long time in sf, and even thrown up some classic works – Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*, for example – but over the last few years it has grown into a substantial sub-genre, much of which is the handi-

work of the seemingly indefatigable Harry Turtledove. His latest, *Ruled Britannia* (New American Library, \$25.95), is unusual because it is not a trilogy or tetralogy but a single volume. Which is at least a part of the reason I was tempted to read and review it, as sheer quantity (even of the easy-reading sort), in my experience, is an even poorer guarantee of quality than dental-work sf.

The other part was the fact that it was alternate history, which I find intriguing, and, in this case, Turtle-dove's particular what-if notion itself. It's England in 1597 but, ten long years before, the Spanish Armada succeeded, Elizabeth languishes in the Tower of London, and the Inquisition is abroad in the land, enforcing the return to Catholicism. However, rebellion against the Spanish occupation is brewing. Will Shakespeare, author of such plays as *If You Like It* and *The Prince of Denmark*, is enlisted by Lord Burleigh and his son to write a work that will spark a revolution. But the Spanish simultaneously commission him to write a play eulogizing their dying monarch, Philip II. Can Will write the seditious play, rehearse and then perform it, without the Spaniards getting wise? And if he can, will the revolution it will hopefully spark succeed?

Turtledove has assembled a who's who of the Elizabethan era. Liz herself is not wheeled on until near the end, but there are "real" folk theatrical, political and criminal. Christopher Marlowe is a supporting character, as are his presumed murderers who are co-conspirators in the perilous plot to free Olde England from the Spanish yoke. Also we get the great Spanish dramatist, Lope de Vega (who actually sailed with the Armada in our history), as an agent for the Spanish government of occupation, charged, amongst other duties, with keeping an eye on Master Shakespeare and his crowd – duties he is determined to faithfully carry out, despite his admiration for Will's literary output.

So far, so good. But there are problems with the novel: two big ones, in fact. Number one, the plot (in both senses of the word) is an idiot plot. Turtledove's revolutionaries are supposedly ultra-crafty, and yet the scheme they put into operation is monumentally daft: they enlist Master Will to first pen this seditious play, which he has to do over months in both his crowded lodgings (he sleeps three-to-a-room) and his local diner, then bring his company in on the scheme to first rehearse and then eventually perform it – just once – and so set off the revolution. And the plotters don't believe in keeping secrets: for no reason I could discern, they make Marlowe jealous by enlisting him not to write the revolutionary

work but to persuade Will to do so. For Turtledove's plot, that's useful, as Marlowe hangs around, brooding in the background, a danger to the conspirators, until a historical parallel comes conveniently along to take him offstage. Also, the seriously dodgy ne'er-do-wells who in our history offed Marlowe are here key conspirators – far from credibly: in both realities the only loyalty they'd have been likely to possess would have been to their own purses and skins. Plus, there's an idiot constable, borrowed from the Bard's *Much Ado About Nothing*, who keeps working out what's going on but who is snootily dismissed as no threat whatsoever by the Machiavellian plotters. So, Turtledove's plot/s are just an excuse to use Will as the central character and along the way pepper the story with both Shakespearean dialogue lifted from the plays (Gramercy, fain, doth, 'tis, etc) and also theatrical and real-history parallels.

Problem two. With Will co-opted into writing the play, the book chugs along with Will scribbling in secret, going from the theatre to his local ordinary (a sort of café) to his lodgings and back again. And again. And again. In short, not a lot seems to happen. I think Turtledove was having such a good time immersing himself in this alternate existence that he forgot to keep his foot on the narrative-drive pedal. And it was really hard to keep track of the way the weeks and months passed for Will. Headings such as *June, 1597* deployed through the text, as well as making it easier to keep time-oriented in the story, might well have added some much-needed dramatic tension.

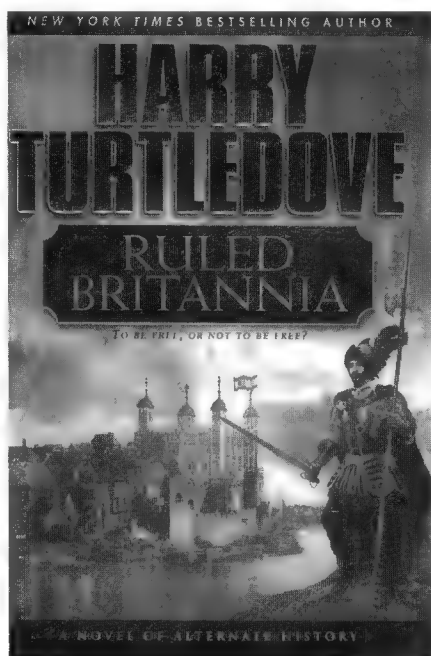
Still, even with these shortcomings, I found the book a pleasant, even enjoyable, read. Elizabethan England is a fascinating historical period in its

own right and Turtledove's obvious enthusiasm has helped to produce a detailed and convincing evocation of the (alternate) times (one nugget, for example, is that for Shakespeare a single sheet of paper cost more than a loaf of bread). Also, with the plot and characters in place, Turtledove has cleverly read through his Bard to extract as much apt dialogue as he can and splice it into his narrative. So, on that level it's certainly a smooth and engaging read and although the plot(s) are not the thing here, if you like alternate history, or have a strong interest in Shakespeare's plays and/or Elizabethan England (or even if you just enjoyed *Shakespeare in Love*), then you should get a lot out of this book.

(Turtledove's novel also prompted me to re-read an alternative Shakespearean gem from Gardner Dozois's *Year's Best Science Fiction: Fifteenth Annual Collection* [1998], William Sanders's "The Undiscovered" – well worth seeking out.)

Now, last but certainly not least, we come to *Silver Nails* by Jack Yeovil (Games Workshop, £5.99). And it's time for a little personal history. Once upon a time, in a galaxy far, far away, I was an sf editor (well, fantasy mostly). A tough job, of course, but the someone who has to do it has the occasional less arduous task. Fondly remembered among them was sitting in my office reading, hot off an Amstrad printer, Jack Yeovil's latest work. *Interzone* readers may know little of Yeovil and be less than envious, but Jack was/is (as is revealed to the wider world by this book) the nom-de-Warhammer of *Interzone* regular Kim Newman. Jack never disappointed. Other writers (myself included, but that's another tale) ably fitted their stories into the Warhammer mythos and ambience – as shared-world fiction goes, I felt and still feel the quality was extremely good – but Jack stepped centre-stage into it and made it his own. Although his stories were standout Warhammer fantasy fiction, they were also excellent fiction in their own right.

Imagine my delight when editor Pringle, himself another admirer of Yeovil's work and the person originally responsible for commissioning Newman to write for Games Workshop, mentioned this book, a collection of Jack's earlier short stories – plus a long one especially written for this volume, "The Ibbby the Fish Factor," which reunites two well-remembered characters, the vampire heroine Genevieve Dieudonné, and her one-time lover, the playwright Detlef Sierck. Strictly speaking, perhaps, my earlier connection with GW should have ruled me out of the running for this review as I was employed by GW





when two of the stories were written. But I didn't give a toss, because I *really* wanted to read that new story – the first new Yeovil Warhammer fantasy tale in over ten years.

I sat down to do so with keen anticipation (and, as I said, this is not the reaction I experience with every sf or fantasy story I'm presented with these days). This time, though, there was some doubt in my mind. Ten years is a very long time. Could Newman match the level of those earlier stories?

O ye of little faith! Once again, I was hooked, charmed, delighted, and impressed: "Ibby" can stand alone as an excellent read but it also seamlessly carries on the cumulative Yeovil-Warhammer storyline as if only ten weeks, rather than ten years, had passed. In it, Genevieve returns to Altdorf, the capital of the (read Holy Roman with liberal servings of fantasy and horror elements) Empire to meet her vampire grandsire and to grapple with a new moral crusade that seeks to destroy vampires.

For this review, I could just have read "Ibby" and relied on my ten-year-old recollections of the other four stories. It was pleasure, not duty, that decided me not to do so. Three have been pulled from other anthologies, and a fourth, written a decade ago, finally sees print for the first time (I was relieved to be able to chuck my old unpublished proof of it, secure in the knowledge that now it could not be lost to posterity). All five stories are sensibly arranged in Warhammer-chronological order, rather than by their date of publication. "Red Thirst" links (literally) Genevieve to the grim mercenary Vukotich. Then there's the short and spooky "No Gold in the Grey Moun-

tains," which features Genevieve's forebear, Melissa d'Acques. That is followed by the tour-de-force "The Ignorant Armies," where an older Vukotich and the young Johann von Mecklenburg, after a ten-year pursuit, catch up with the Chaos Champion, Cicatrice, who kidnapped Johann's younger brother: it takes the Warhammer notion of the eternal battlefield and, in using it as the setting for the climax of the long chase, produces one of the defining stories of the Warhammer mythos. Finally, there's "The Warhawk," which features two of Jack's characters from an earlier novel, *Beasts in Velvet*, the hard-as-nails Altdorf City watchman, Dirty Harald Kleindeist, and the psychic, Rosanna Ophuls, and pits them against a serial killer who uses a hawk to kill his victims.

So, were the older stories as good as I remembered? Honestly, no: I think, actually, they're even better. While still just as caught up in the story, I had a keener appreciation of the writing craft deployed in their creation. There's no unnecessarily flashy prose and no padding: every sentence delivers. This shows from the very first line – and, offhand, I can't think of anyone in the business who can match Jack's track record of instantly compelling beginnings. For example:

"The sky was his enemy, his prison. All his life, Warhawk had tried to escape its dreary pull."

Of course, Newman never set out to write anything more than plain good stories. But he has ended up doing much more than that. As with Lois Bujold's work, his stories do what really top-class fiction does; they absorb and entertain, but beyond that they also leave the reader with just a little more awareness and appreciation of the real world: they have something to say and they have characters that seem real enough to care about.

While I strongly recommend this collection, I still have to finish this review on an unhappy note. "Ibby," excellent as it is, is presumably just a one-off written to fill out this collection, and I really want more Jack Yeovil Warhammer fiction. Ten years ago, when the line went into its first hiatus (and my own career as an sf editor ended), Jack had several novels ready-plotted in his mind: for instance, I'd really like to read *Bitch Vampire* (think a vampire Catherine the Great of Russia in the title role) and also *Vastarien's Vanquishers* (a medieval fantasy *Dirty Dozen*). Games Workshop, either way, pay the man so lavishly he simply can't refuse to work for you, or kidnap him and chain him to a word processor in your Notting-ham HQ...

So, three books I've actually enjoyed reading. Now that's entertainment.

Neil Jones

All Done with Mirrors

William Thompson

One might reasonably expect that the title of China Miéville's novella *The Tain* (PS Publishing, £25 hb; £8 tp) is an allusion to one of the more famous epics of early Irish literature. But if so, it serves as but a tease, a feint for those coming to fantasy with the usual expectations. Instead "the Tain" refers to the thin layer of tin foil traditionally used to produce mirrors, which becomes, à la Borges, the specular source for Miéville's latest dystopic imagining.

Borrowing a conceit from *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, Miéville expands upon the history of the "Fauna of Mirrors" in which the specular world originally conceived by Borges finally breaks free of its mirror imprisonment, bringing on the destruction of the world of men. Bizarre images roam the shattered landscape of London, fractured reflections having both corporeal and spectral form, stalking its denizens and slaughtering all they come upon. Their malevolence is total, and the city has been reduced to rubble, pockets of resistance warring among the ruins, the few survivors living furtively in abandoned buildings or turning to prey upon each another. Only one man appears immune to the imagoes' murderous hostility, and he sets off on a dangerous journey through the shattered metropolis to find the imago at the heart of its destruction, hoping to offer a gift he believes will end mankind's annihilation.

In this outing Miéville proves he is as much a master of the short narrative as he is of the sprawling epic. And, in the concision of his ideas, the enforced compression required of the novella, some might say he has admirably jettisoned some of the descriptive padding of his more epic efforts, paring the narrative down to its purest essentials. The end result is a story that is tightly focused upon both its supporting story as well as its metaphoric themes, in some ways more reductively dense than his earlier work as well as more intellectually



challenging in its oblique and intentionally reflective use of metaphor. Without the oversized use of symbolic props available in his larger work, Miéville relies more upon concise expressions of ideas, landscape and latent correspondences to reveal the narrative's internal motifs, demanding meditation for which the author provides no ready answers. This is not to say that fans of his earlier grand and alienated visions will be disappointed, but that he has reduced their form into a far more compact model without losing any of their imaginative potency. This is as rich and vivid a narrative world as his more sprawling epics, but in a much sharper and more concentrated dose. Impressive and, along with the short story contributed to *Conjunctions* 39, further proof of the range of mastery this young author has over his chosen narrative form, regardless of format. Easily one of the best stories published to date by PS Publishing, which already possesses a notable bibliography.

The setting for Lucius Shepard's *Louisiana Breakdown* (Golden Gryphon, \$21.95) could not be more different. Opening with an establishment of locale reminiscent of other Southern masters of setting, such as Faulkner or Flannery O'Connor, Shepard immediately announces his identification with a long and regional literary tradition, as well as a love and intimate knowledge of an older, possibly fading, rural culture and environment. And though this short novel could be accused of pandering to certain social stereotypes, anyone who has travelled the deltas and bayous of the Deep South can tell you that this region remains the most culturally individual and conservative area of the United States, quite unlike any other. At times certain generalizations may indeed apply.

Jack Mustaine is just passing through, a musician from California headed to Florida. Escaping a professional rut as well as a relationship with a wealthy older woman, his car breaks down on the outskirts of Grail, Louisiana, located somewhere along the Gulf. After an initial altercation with the local constable, Jack is rescued by the town's leading citizen and his flirtatious Vietnamese girlfriend. As his car will be laid up for repairs, they take him to the town's most popular watering hole, Le Bon Chance. There Jack will be picked up by a mysterious woman, Vida Dumars, an encounter that will prove both a promise and a curse for both.

It doesn't take Jack long to conclude that Grail is a decidedly weird place, a confluence of the mystical and the mundane. Many of the residents claim to be psychic, and store-fronts dispensing strange remedies and occult

knowledge nestle beside grocers and photography shops. The townsfolk believe they are blessed by a bargain made long ago with a legend called the Good Grey Man, a compact that doesn't seem so much to have made Grail prosper as to have held it in a kind of stasis, a perpetual state of affairs in which little truly bad or momentous occurs. Still, most of the town's residents appear satisfied with the deal they have struck, and every 20 years, on St John's Eve, a Midsummer's Queen is selected from among their young daughters, a living embodiment of the town's pact, as well as its continued good fortune. Jack has arrived just before the start of festivities. As it turns out, his new girlfriend is just as unusual as the town. The current Midsummer's Queen, she will soon hand over to her successor. But she has not worn the crown easily, and has only recently returned to Grail after falling in with an occult figure from New Orleans. This man continues to haunt her, both in her dreams as well as in waking moments, and Vida prays for escape, both from her troubled past and from Grail. Thus her meeting of Jack seems a god-send, an opportunity to leave both town and past behind her. All that's needed is to wait and pass on her title to the next Queen.

Those jumping to the conclusion that this is just another visit to voodoo are mistaken. Borrowing and blending from various folklore and horror traditions, Shepard's flair for language and composition largely carries the narrative along, even when certain elements appear familiar. Standard tropes, such as Jack's confrontation with the typical redneck sheriff, are easily vivified through Shepard's vibrant use of description and setting,

as well as his attention to characters. And the story moves in directions, particularly towards the end, that are not entirely anticipated. The author's use of the already heavily freighted grail, while not completely abandoning its traditional associations, is novel in approach, as is the utilization of occult elements to raise unexpected existential questions.

My only real problem with the narrative came with the inclusion of a Vietnamese village in the scene depicting the St John's Eve festivities. This seems to have little relevance to the main storyline, and if meant as an attempt at some political statement, it failed in its effect, appearing out of context and contrived. Additionally, after the marvellous care and patience expended in establishing the setting during the first chapter, Vida's introduction and the events occurring after her swim in the second felt comparatively rushed and premature, a change in pacing which is out of balance with what precedes and follows. Finally, I remain unconvinced that J. K. Potter's rather lurid illustrations complement the story well, though I know there are those that appreciate pictures harkening back to the heyday of the pulps. Nonetheless, and despite these caveats, this is a very enjoyable novel overall, and to be recommended both for its many narrative strengths and for the author's stylish writing. It's more than just another romp in the swamp.

In *Firing the Cathedral* (PS Publishing, £25 hb; £8 tp), Michael Moorcock resurrects his quintessential incarnation of an earlier era, Jerry Cornelius. As Alan Moore suggests in his introduction: "By 1980, Jerry seemed as obsolete as any other glittering exotic piece of wreckage that originated from that now alternately reviled and sentimentalized decade, the 1960s." So is there some significance in his reappearance now? Once again America appears poised to embark upon another foreign military adventure, this time in the deserts of Iraq rather than the jungles of Vietnam. And its justifications and motivations this time bear an eerie if broad resemblance to events back in the 1960s, and possess an equal and similar potential for disaster, division and social strife. As the band Big Audio Dynamite states in *Sony*, "The West don't learn from history." But if anything, at least for American society, the Bush administration's policies appear even more ominous for the future – and Moorcock, living as an expatriate in Dubya's heartland of Texas, has made the obvious connection.

Drawing from the same cast of quirky characters that supported Jerry



in his earlier adventures, in short staccato bursts of fire, like the video-bites with which CNN likes to pre-package our news, Moorcock sprays political and social pot-shots at just about everyone: liberals, Hollywood, fantasy, colonialism, Israel, Britain, religion and the Church and, of course, the current American administration. Punctuating his narrative with press clippings that open each brief chapter, Moorcock threads the symmetries that exist between past and present, at times in a manner that is frankly surreal and all the more disturbing for their being taken from actual headlines and advertisements. Barbed and often darkly humorous, the author constructs a narrative pastiche as roving and free-ranging as the topics upon which he lights, and yet, in the seeming disparity of their narrative appearance, creates a fractured vision that is at once cohesive and fluid, shifting only to reappear at another time and place, within a different form but reflecting the same overall outline. And instead of relying upon one single discharge to be heard round his narrative world, he has loaded his textual guns with grapeshot, and the broadside could not be more timely or effective.

The composition of this novella most resembles a flickering series of snapshots, similar to the opening of David Fincher's film *Seven* in which the viewer glimpses images that elude complete comprehension. More a montage of correspondences, readers will need to dispense with a desire for a tightly structured plot, a linear storyline to guide them along the narrative path. Instead this novella owes more to the free association of Joyce or Virginia Woolf than the more common compositional strategies of science fiction and fantasy. Replete with one-liners and quotable asides, vignettes that serve as polemical postcards, the rewards of this loosely linked narrative are often found among its components, though one would be unwise to overlook the sum of its parts. And while certain historical observations are sure to raise the occasional eyebrow, more often than not Moorcock hits his target.

There are those that will likely take issue with some of Moorcock's insights, arguing simplification or possibly bias. This is, after all, as much a political assault as fiction. But I would contend this work could not be timelier, and those of similar views will find much here to cheer about. And at least one author in the field has stepped up to confront the issues. Not surprising that it's Moorcock.

The Hacker and the Ants: Version 2.0 (Four Walls Eight Windows, \$13.95) is a reissue of a Rudy Rucker novel, first published in 1994, and later republished in an apparently

juvenile edition in 2000. As its title implies, this edition has been "freely revised" by the author in order to eliminate anachronisms from the original text, as well as to update the technology and expand upon earlier descriptions of robotics. In his preface, Rucker states that he has also attempted to humanize his lead character, Jerzy Rugby, a bit more, as well as provide a tie between this novel and *Software*. Having not read the original novel, I can't claim whether or not these revisions have been comparatively successful. However I can offer some comment based solely upon the "upgrade."

For anyone not initiated into programming or possessing more than an average level of computer literacy (and I am blessed or cursed with a knowledge of both), narratively this novel starts out rather slowly, plagued as is much science fiction with the technical exegesis necessary to establish the story's context. And I suspect those without an interest in computers beyond e-mail, gaming, web-surfing and office programs will weary of the novel well before it gets started. However, for those willing to push past the exposition, or with an interest or familiarity in robotics and programming, once the setting is established, the narrative portion of the novel quickly propels itself along, revealing a fascinating vision of corporate intrigue and digital creativity run amuck.

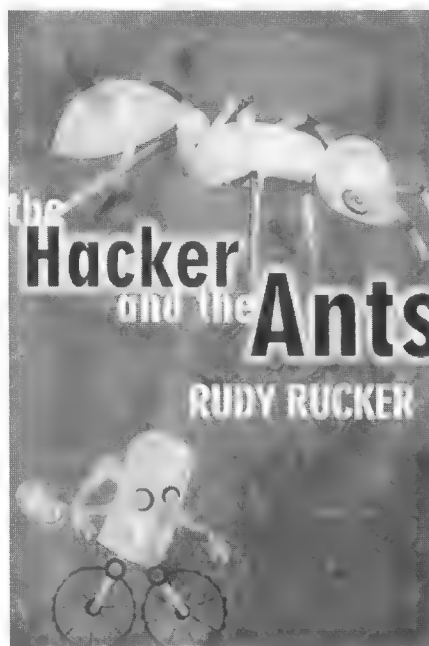
Jerzy Rugby is in some ways a stereotypical caricature of the computer geek, obsessed with programming, known among the techno-cognoscenti in the novel as *hacking* as opposed to *phreaking* and *crpying*, which is how the world at large has come erroneously to view creative programming. Wearing glasses, clashing attire, oddly unorthodox and domestic with a fond-

ness for pot and women, Jerzy's immersion in programming and cyberspace has brought him a certain degree of material affluence while at the same time destroying his marriage. Self-absorbed, yet equally dedicated to the "Great Work" – the creation of artificial life – Jerzy works for GoMotion, a Silicon Valley startup involved with the design of household robots. Headed by a brilliant and wealthy eccentric, GoMotion is also exploring the creation of self-evolving cybernetic ants, an experiment whose software Jerzy has helped to write. Creating on the cutting-edge, Jerzy and GoMotion live and work almost entirely in cyberspace, through headsets and simulation accessing a digital realm existing parallel and as an extension to our own. Though Jerzy's personal life is in shambles, GoMotion is days away from launching their first line of robots, the beginning of what Jerzy hopes is the inauguration of artificial life-forms, and the fulfillment of all he's worked for.

Prior to the launch, however, Jerzy discovers that GoMotion ants have somehow escaped their virtual program, like a virus invading his computer. It appears they may have been transferred to his system through an e-mail from his employer. But was this intentional or an accident? To his dismay Jerzy soon realizes that the ants have not only infested his computer, but established a nest in cyberspace itself. And they are evolving. Inexplicably fired from his job, Jerzy finds himself embroiled in a web of corporate espionage and intrigue in which he appears to have been set up as the patsy. And when the ants end up invading digital television, suddenly Jerzy is accused by the authorities as well as by GoMotion of being the culprit. In order to clear his name, he will have to discover who is behind the ants' invasion, and why.

Told with a great amount of humour, this lighthearted look at the world of hacking and cyberspace is as much parody as a possible misadventure of the future. While the author's satire has bite, any seriousness of tone is largely vitiated by the burlesque quality of his characters and the quick-flung development of his plot. And the internal logic of the story unravels towards the end, losing much of its loose credibility in contrived character appearances as well as facile plot resolutions, with a summary epiphany and moral at the happily-ever-after conclusion that fails to be convincing. Though enjoyable for its humour and its vision of cyberspace, this is more a divertissement than substantial fiction, and lacks the care in plotting or quality of characterization to make the story truly memorable.

William Thompson



Every now and then a book appears that prompts the exclamation "Ahah!" with an idea that you recognize as brilliant, because it's blindingly obvious with hindsight, yet it's not been done before. *Evolution* by Stephen Baxter (Gollancz, £12.99) is a novel that attains this rare distinction, with the simple idea of telling the story of primate evolution from the dinosaur era to the present day and beyond.

The first thing that caught my eye was the book's banner declaring "... by the natural heir to Arthur C. Clarke." Maybe the general sf book-buying audience of today would be influenced by such a claim, but *Evolution* belongs more to the mainstream genre that includes James A. Michener's groundbreaking *The Source* (1965), about the foundation of Judaism, and the various works of Edward Rutherfurd, notably *Sarum* (1987), about the history of Britain. These works are characterized by a framing tale set in the present day. Embedded within this are a series of short stories, arranged chronologically, and spaced over hundreds, or thousands, of years. Interperse the narrative with little authoritative asides on particular issues that the short stories illustrate, and you have a sort of "factional" account that can both focus on moments in individual lives, and also broaden out into a mega-epic that can encompass the sweep of empires.

It's a powerful form, and if any writer is going to tackle the subject of human evolution in this way, Stephen Baxter is the one for the job. He loves to spin stories over vast timespans, so it's a natural thing for him to take this genre and expand its boundaries from merely thousands of years up to geological epochs. His experience gained in writing novels from animals' points-of-view (the "Mammoth" series) is useful for writing credibly through the eyes of so many different types of primates on our long journey from rodent-like creature to human being; his knowledge of science and science writing is invaluable when it comes to describing different aspects of evolution on Earth.

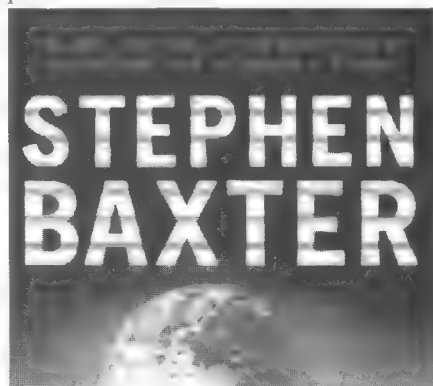
The book itself consists of 20 tales set over a timespan of 565 million years, in only (!) 583 pages. That works out to about a million years a page; the narrative necessarily leaps over millions of years between the short stories. The framing tale is set in our time (or near enough on this scale, actually 2031). A group of scientists are going to a conference set up to attempt a staving off of human-induced extinction events. Joan Useb, a palaeontologist, recalls being shown the tooth of a dinosaur-era mammal, *Purgatorius*. The narrative clock reels back 65 million years and the magic

Primate Panorama

Nigel Brown

begins: we're prowling the night with Purga, Joan's (and our) ancestor, one of the earliest of all primates. It's a wonderful conceit, an entrancing fantasy that we're being privileged to experience the life of this creature. We're all curious about our origins, and, when set so far back in time, the subject is irresistible.

Any casual observer of pop science has an alarm bell which rings at the back of their mind when they hear or see the phrase "65 million years ago." Yep – it's the Big One. The dinosaur-killer comet that's about to drop on their saurian heads. Baxter doesn't blink with the impact – the reader gets to live through it all. Confusingly, however, at this point Baxter takes us further back in time by another 80 million years. A short story about sentient dinosaurs, "The Hunters of Pangaea" (which has already appeared in *Analog* magazine, December 2002) illustrates how dinosaurs might have begun to evolve intelligence. It's an enjoyable tale, but it seems out of place to be suddenly presented with this story before the momentum of the primate stories has been established. I



evolution

a novel

A STUNNING TALENT! *Locust*

would have preferred to see it in a foreword rather than in the main text of the book.

After this, Baxter proceeds – for the most part – to illustrate the progressive stages of primate development leading to *Homo sapiens*. The stories feature tree-dwelling, the advantages of group living (and its effect on brain development) and, around five million years ago, the behavioural choices that led to our genetic split from the primates that later evolved into chimpanzees. Again, there are digressions: the first is a harrowing, very speculative tale of how monkeys colonized the Americas, and the second is an account of dinosaur and mammal survival in Antarctica up to only ten million years ago.

This last astonished me – I thought all the dinosaurs had died out after the comet impact... and herein lies the reader's problem with this type of novel: How much is fact? How much is fiction? By its very nature – and the cover banner does proclaim "The Epic Story of Life on Earth Told By..." – it's too easy to assume that the fictional narrative is backed up by anthropological evidence. Yet Baxter does say in the Afterword that his book shouldn't be read as a textbook: some of the reconstructions are based on "wild speculation." Baxter had been so convincing in his portrayal of the past, up to this point, that he becomes a victim of his own success: when I came across this story of dinosaur survival millions of years after the comet impact, the idea (although fascinating and plausible) jarred within the context of the book.

The middle section of the novel, subtitled "Humans," deals with the usual suspects – *Homo erectus* (the first true proto-human bipeds, and stone-tool users), the Neanderthals, and then – at last – our own species, *Homo sapiens*. The story set in 60,000 BC is of particular interest, as it deals with the explosion of creativity that occurred at that time. Some have put the cause down to the invention of language, but Baxter goes with the more interesting explanation to do with the breakdown of compartmentalization of thought structures within the brain: the invention of symbol, of metaphor. He explains this with admirable skill; the drama never flags throughout this particular story, despite the hypothetical concepts being put across. But *Evolution* is a collection of 20 stories, and not all are as successful as this; some fail the "so what?" test – notably one that deals with the colonization of Australia, which seems to be there merely to illustrate that *Homo sapiens* was responsible for mass extinctions across that continent.



The "framing" story is a drama in itself, setting up the third section of the novel, sub-titled "Descendants." Here, we truly move into the realm of the conventional sf story, but Baxter skilfully projects this future onto the evolutionary canvas that he's been building. The first story, called "The Long Shadow," is a classic sf tale about a group of survivors waking up on a future Earth. It's been done many times before, but Baxter's version is all the more memorable given the narrative momentum of stories that lead up to it. The weight of the sf canon hangs heavy here, especially as Baxter is the author of the only official sequel, *The Time Ships* (1995), to H.G. Wells's masterpiece *The Time Machine* (1895) – Baxter winks at the reader when one of his characters names a far-future woman "Weena." Yet other literary

What a lot of wonderful books there are about at the moment! First up, M. John Harrison abandons the dark alleyways of mainstream fiction for the *Light* (Gollancz, £10.99) of a galaxy-spanning space opera romp, and, with this return to his roots, it is likely he has both a best-seller and an award-winner on his hands.

The novel begins with three very different strands, separated widely in both time and space, and consequently follows the adventures of three quite separate central characters. Or at least it seems that way. In 1999 we encounter Michael Kearney, a scientist with a dark secret and a very bad social manner, who, it becomes plain, is one of the co-inventors of the star drive that puts humanity into space. Next up, in 2400 AD we encounter Seria Mau Genlicher, Captain of the K-ship *White Cat*. And then, again in 2400, but this time planetside, at New

roots are apparent in this section of the book: notably Olaf Stapledon with his *Last and First Men* (1930), and the whole British sf dystopic tradition of John Wyndham, J. G. Ballard and John Christopher. Our civilization doesn't prevail. There's none of American sf's boldly going out, seeking new worlds, new civilizations...

For, ultimately, Baxter's book is about the evolution of humans and attempts to tell the whole story from start to finish. Indeed, there has to be a finish – a sense of closure. It was Arthur C. Clarke who, in novel form at least, with *Childhood's End* (1953) and *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), described humanity's transformation and consequent transcendence into a higher life-form. But *Evolution* isn't about that. It attempts to demonstrate the random nature of natural selec-

tion, which is as indifferent to moral forces as is the law of gravity.

Baxter's *Evolution* is a grand commentary that explores various aspects of the origin of our species. In that respect, the novel would be considered subversive by the disturbingly large numbers of "Creationists" still around, but I think it's even more essential reading for anyone who needs to be persuaded of the importance of the space programme, of not keeping all our eggs in one planetary basket.

By the end of the book, I felt that – minor quibbles aside – my exclamation of interest on first seeing it had been justified, and Baxter had provided me with a gripping read, whilst slipping in enough about the evolution of our species to make me feel that I'd had a enjoyable education too. Unmissable.

Nigel Brown

From Light into Limbo and beyond

Paul Brazier

Venusport, we encounter Tig Vesicle, a kind of quasi-alien called a New Man, who runs a tank farm wherein is hiding Ed Chianese, a low-life ne'er-do-well who would rather avoid trouble than face it, and as a consequence creates more problems than he solves. That the destinies of such disparate characters could possibly be intertwined seems vastly unlikely, but equally certain, as they feature in the first three chapters of the book. That Harrison does this on purpose seems equally certain. He is having fun! There is a peculiar tripartite opposition between these three. We begin in an ennui-ridden fin-de-siècle England just before the turn of the millennium, and follow the doings of a typically Harrisonian world-weary middle-class character for a few pages. Then, in the second chapter, we find ourselves far out across the galaxy joining a spaceship captain in her favourite place –

Up there, a thousand lights out of the galactic core, the Kefahuchi Tract streams across half the sky, trailing its vast invisible plumes of dark matter. Seria Mau liked it there. She liked the halo. She liked the ragged margins of the tract itself, which everyone called "the Beach," where the corroded old pre-

human observatories wove their chaotic orbits, tool-platforms and laboratories abandoned millions of years previously by entities who had no idea where they were – or perhaps anymore *what* they were. They had all wanted a closer look at the Tract. Some of them had steered whole planets into position, then wandered off or died out. Some of them had steered whole solar systems into position, then lost them.

This is the stuff, by gosh! It is certainly the kind of thing I found fascinating about science fiction when I first discovered it forever ago. It is, however, of itself not very interesting and could begin to pall very quickly once the sense of wonder is sated. This is where Harrison shows his mastery of his craft; where such a passage could be thought of as mere scene setting, or, with a bit more depth, an objective-correlative, it is in fact so intricately a part of the structure of the whole story that the only way for interested readers to see how it all ties together is to read the book for themselves – preferably several times.

In a manner that is equally oblique, while the third central character appears in the third chapter, he is not in fact introduced for some time, and for a while the mystified reader is left to wonder just how many characters there will be to keep track of. Never fear, this is all part of the fun. Pretty soon the narrative settles down to a reasonably regular turning from one storyline to another, and it becomes plain that extraneous characters, such as Tig Vesicle, mentioned above, are there in order to supply at once a mirror and a foil to the three central characters and their inevitable journey towards reconciliation with one another.

On the literary/philosophical side, Harrison is also having fun. It is a tired criticism of science fiction that it



can be plot-driven rather than character-driven. What becomes clear in this story to any space-going race is that their form of space-drive is entirely different from any other race's drive. The inescapable conclusion, then, is that what is vital is the need to build a space-drive. At the point this particular character-development occurs in a race, any kind of drive they invent will work – one has the impression that one day we will meet a race travelling in ships powered by string and matchsticks and rubber bands, except that Harrison is writing a quasi-serious novel here, not a satire. Nevertheless, in this case, he has managed to introduce character-driven spaceships.

There are contemporary themes, such as serial-killers and child abuse, that feel almost *de rigueur*, but if these are put in as a sop to the mainstream literary aficionados of Harrison's work, then it is a small price to pay to have such a wonderful, playful and solidly genre-based masterpiece set before us. Don't hesitate. Buy this book and read it. You will thank me.

Another cornucopia of characters appears in *Limbo* (Tor UK, £10.99), a first novel from Andy Secombe. In fact, with the first introduction in chapter nine of space garbage operative Serena Kowalski and her orbiting garbage-disposal satellite, into a story that has previously featured: a pig-like deranged Detective Inspector on a Harley-Davidson; a couple of middle-aged mild-mannered shopkeepers; Lancing, Hove and Portslade (south coast towns near Brighton) in the late 20th century; and Castle Limbo in a timeless place also called Limbo that has a King and a Queen and a court wizard and a prophecy, I began to worry that Secombe was in danger of losing the plot.

I shouldn't have worried. Even the further introduction of Marcus Agrippa and his Roman legions invading the King Alfred Centre on Hove seafront contributes confidently to the overall set-up and Secombe manages a fine ravelling up of the sleeve of care into a rip-roaring hilarious romp from beginning to end.

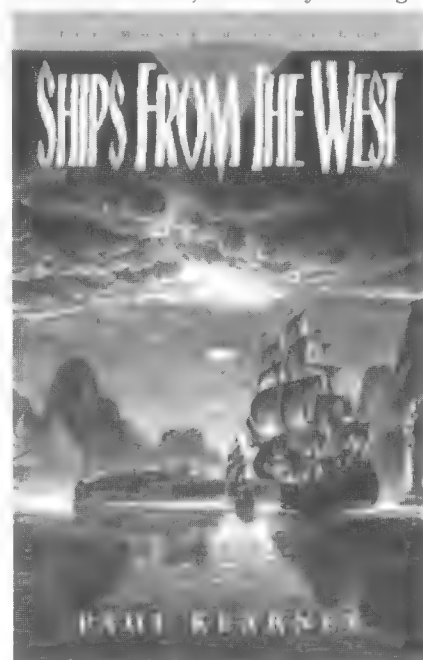
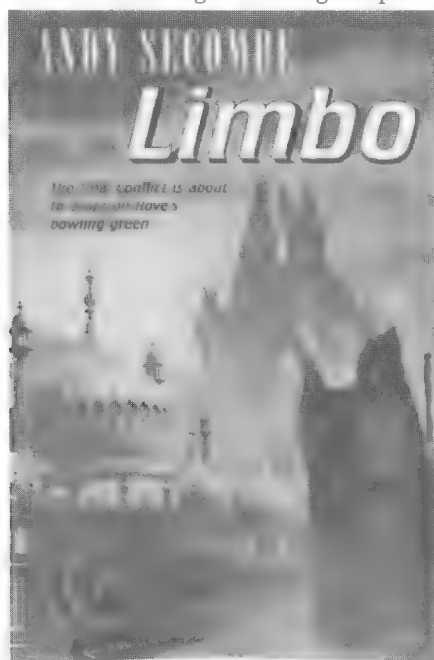
At the core of any really great comedy there is a strong sense of the misery and desolation that is the human condition. That Secombe grasps this firmly but lightly and places it at the centre of his comedy is the sure mark of a man who knows what he is doing, and if he continues to produce books of this strength he will quickly win a place in the highest rank of comic fantasy novelists alongside Robert Rankin, Tom Holt, even Terry Pratchett or Douglas Adams. It is encouraging to see that this book closes itself off satisfactorily with little chance for a sequel. It will be fascinating to see what he does in the future, and without the dead hand of sequelitis on his shoulder, there is no limit to what he can achieve.

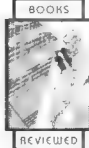
Sequelitis is a dread disease, and one that it is unpleasant to see a favourite writer suffering from; so it is always good when they finally get put out of their misery. *Ships from the West* (Gollancz, £17.99) is the fifth volume in Paul Kearney's *Monarchies of God* series, and apparently it is the final one, although nothing in the book's packaging indicates this. However, I'm told the American edition does state that this is the last book, and, indeed, there is strong internal evidence that it is – all the major characters die, leaving only their children to carry on their feuds and disputes and envies and wars. If it weren't for the children, I would have been most strongly reminded of the end of *Blake's Seven*.

Now that the series is over, it is a strong temptation to go back and read the whole story in one go. The vigour and the forward planning necessary to create as complex a narrative as this are prodigious, especially as Kearney has another career as a writer of the kind of fat SAS novels that only ever seem to be on sale in airport departure lounges. Kearney's early novels were certainly more enjoyable, but mostly because each of them stood alone. That said, it is important to point out that any of the *Monarchies of God* series can be read successfully as a stand-alone novel. And as such, I felt it rather over-strained to see so many people being brought to their final battles and killed in this volume – the sense that the publisher has said, "enough, this isn't selling any more, finish it off," floats powerfully in the background, but Kearney makes a compelling and clear narrative of it.

Stephen Gallagher was an author who I had been unconsciously avoiding, as I thought he was a horror writer, and I have an aversion to much modern horror. So it seemed something of a mixed blessing recently to come into the possession of his new novella, *White Bizango* (PS Publishing, £8). But it's short, so I thought I'd give it a try. And very good it is too. Less of a horror novel and more of a police procedural, it is finally a story primarily of character. Gallagher gradually strips away all the worldly goods and chattels of a Louisianan detective, and reveals the incorruptible human being underneath. As this book is apparently being reviewed in more depth by another contributor, I will say no more than, as a result of reading it, I will be seeking out Steve Gallagher's other work.

When Gwyneth Jones won the Arthur C. Clarke award last year, it was reminiscent of her much earlier success in 1986 with *King Death's Garden* written as by Ann Halam for the young-adult market. Under this name she has produced many more books since that are sometimes science fiction, sometimes spooky, but always an adventure and always challenging. The most recent, *Taylor Five* (Dolphin, £4.99) is subtitled on the cover, "The story of a clone girl." No doubt this was a marketing ploy to cash in on the recent fuss about human cloning and Dolly the Sheep, as it doesn't appear anywhere inside the book, and it is not strictly accurate. The tale told is in fact of an adventure that Taylor Five is involved in that, incidentally, reveals to her her true nature and thus adds depth to an already exciting and suspenseful narrative. It is set in the forests of Borneo, where Tay is being





brought up as the daughter of a husband-and-wife team of wardens at an orang-utan reserve.

As it is told entirely from Tay's point-of-view, it quickly becomes plain that she is an ordinary girl, just like any other, with whom any adolescent would have no trouble at all sympathizing. It is her situation that is extraordinary. Rebels invade the reserve compound, and various people are killed or taken away. Tay and her brother avoid capture and set off on an epic trek through the jungle to seek help, in company with one of the tamer orang-utans. It is, of course, well known that the great apes are very close to human beings in intelligence – indeed, the orang-utan is known as the Old Man of the Forest – and the real story here unfolds as the orang-utan exhibits more and more human-like characteristics as they travel through the jungle so that Tay, far from doubting her own humanity as a result of finding herself to be a clone, has it revealed to her that humanity is a manifested characteristic, not a birthright – the orang-utan often appears to be far more human than many of the so-called human beings that they encounter.

Dr Franklin's Island (Dolphin



£4.99) appeared a year earlier, but is every bit as compelling. This time, Halam takes on the theme of *The Island of Dr Moreau*, but as is usual, she gives it very much her own twist, so that while the science-fictional aspect of the story may appear slightly fanciful, the motivations of both the

evil scientists and the youngsters they experiment upon are humanly drawn and spot on. This is particularly noticeable when the two central character teenagers actually metamorphose into a fish and a bird, and begin to take on the characteristics of their new body forms. Plainly, their humanity is receding, and it is only the action of one of the evil scientists who has something of a change of heart that allows them to revert to their human forms and escape. Again, Jones/Halam goes right to the heart of the problem, and interestingly here it seems to contradict the message of *Taylor Five* – that humanity is at least partly dependent on the form the being takes, although perhaps in another sense, as orang-utans look so nearly human it is perfectly possible for them to be human, whereas for fish and birds it is not so.

As the author of the Clarke-award-winning *Bold as Love*, Gwyneth Jones must surely have had her hands full writing the two subsequent parts of that trilogy. That at the same time she has produced these stunning and stimulating fantasies for younger readers is astonishing, and is the mark, if further marks were needed, of a true professional.

Paul Brazier

In January this year, BBC Radio 4 broadcast a three-part adaptation of Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy. Each play is two-and-a-half hours long, adapted by Lavinia Murray and produced by Janet Whitaker; each features a main cast of at least 22 people. Lulu Popplewell and Daniel Anthony star as Lyra and Will, Emma Fielding and Terence Stamp play Mrs Coulter and Lord Asriel, and Ray Fearon, who plays recording angel Balthamos, also serves as narrator. The plays are now available from BBC Radio Collection on cassette (£10.99 each), CD (£12.99 each) or in a handsomely presented boxed set (£30 for cassette, £36 for CD), with some intriguing covers by Rian Hughes.

I have to confess from the outset that I've been spoiled; having listened to the Chivers Press version of the trilogy (all 35 hours of it; see past reviews), read and performed by Pullman himself and a host of actors, one cannot help feeling that a seven-and-a-half hour version risks being too short. There are undoubtedly ways of dealing with this but the first novel, *Northern Lights*, with its scarcity of crowd scenes and sound effects, comes across as a heavily abridged straight reading rather than a *bona fide* radio play. It's tempting to draw comparisons with *The Lord of the Rings* (given the rumoured plans for a filmed version of "His Dark Materials"), and on the whole scriptwriter Lavinia Murray is

His Dark Materials: The Radio Plays

Paul Beardsley

no Brian Sibley. On the other hand, the occasional liberties that she takes with the text work to good effect; for instance, we learn what happens when a daemon tastes poisoned tokay, and the Spectres from the second volume are introduced early.

Matters improve with the second novel, *The Subtle Knife*. The acting is better, Brid Brennan is a more convincing Mary Malone than Kate Lock was in the Chivers Press version, and the opening scenes in a supermarket feel like a proper adaptation. This second play captures more of the story than before, but once again the time constraints make themselves felt, as vital scenes are hurried through or even cut out altogether. In fact it wasn't until I listened to the third part, *The Amber Spyglass* – by far the most rushed of the three plays – that I realized the

trilogy's main strength lies in its telling details and individual dramatic moments rather than in its heavy-weight set-pieces. One of the most chilling scenes in *Knife* – the one with the Spectres gathering around the nearly-adolescent boy in Cittagazze – is sadly missing from the adaptation, and the fate of the Knife – a crucial part of *Spyglass* – is brutally reworked.

Nevertheless, Ms Murray has done a splendid job in presenting the trilogy to a Radio 4 audience, and the recordings are a very attractive addition to any audio collection.

Paul Beardsley



This is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the period specified. Official publication dates, where known, are given in italics at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Armstrong, Kelley. **Bitten.** Time Warner, ISBN 0-7515-3094-8, 448pp, A-format paperback, cover by Dominic Harman, £6.99. (Supernatural thriller, first published in the USA [?], 2001; a debut novel by a new Canadian writer, and probably the first of a series, this seems to be Buffy- or Anita Blake-lookalike stuff, about a sexy, kickass werewolf girl; apparently there was a British hardcover edition from Little, Brown in 2001 but we don't recall seeing it.) *20th February 2003.*

Baldry, Cherith. **The Reliquary Ring.** Macmillan, ISBN 0-333-98944-9, 424pp, C-format paperback, cover by Mick Posen, £10.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; described as "a glorious fantasy of an alternative Venice," this is the author's first adult novel to be published in Britain, although she has published several children's novels in the UK plus at least one adult fantasy book in America; although it's presented as a fantasy, this new work seems to have sf elements, concerning as it does "genics" – or "genetically engineered people" – in an Italianate, urban-fantasy setting.) *21st February 2003.*

Banker, Ashok K. **Prince of Ayodhya: Book One of the Ramayana.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-186-1, 532pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; this is a debut novel by Banker, a 38-year-old writer living in Mumbai [Bombay], India, who has published two short stories in *Interzone* and a handful in American magazines, as well as a copious amount of fiction and journalism in his home country; it's the first of a trilogy which will re-tell, in modern style, the story of one of the old Indian epic poems, *The Ramayana* by Valmiki; recommended to those who are looking for something lushly different.) *February 2003.*

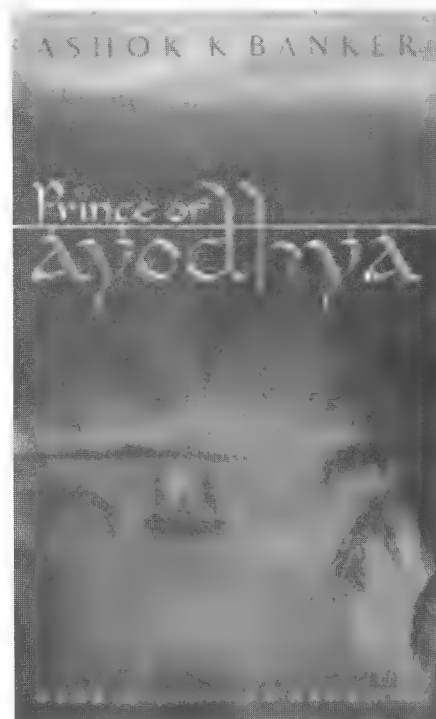
Bear, Greg. **The Collected Stories of Greg Bear.** Tor/Orb, ISBN 0-765-30161-X, 653pp, trade paperback, \$17.95. (Sf collection, first published in the USA, 2002; it contains two dozen stories, spanning Bear's career from the early 1970s to the present; there's also an author's introduction and

appendix, plus individual intros and afterwords to all the stories; solid stories, solid book.) *27th March 2003.*

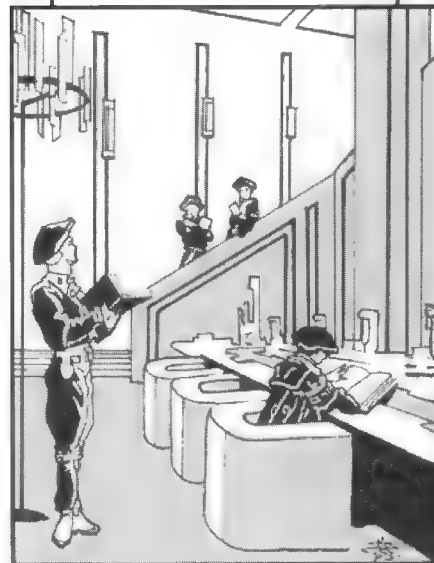
Bradbury, Ray. **One More for the Road.** Earthlight, ISBN 0-7434-4074-9 290pp, A-format paperback, cover by Trevor Scobie, £6.99. (Sf/horror/fantasy/mainstream collection, first published in the USA, 2002; Bradbury's first new collection since the two which came in swift succession, *Quicker Than the Eye* [1996] and *Driving Blind* [1997], it contains 25 stories, none of them collected before, 17 of them apparently written in the past few years and now published for the first time, eight of them reprinted from magazines – in one case, "Time Inter-vening," dating from as far back as 1947; this is the UK first edition, straight into mass-market paperback.) *7th April 2003.*

Carey, Jacqueline. **Kushiel's Avatar.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87240-2, 702pp, hardcover, \$27.95. (Historical fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; follow-up to *Kushiel's Dart* [2001] and *Kushiel's Chosen* [2002] in the "Kushiel's Legacy" trilogy.) *April 2003.*

Clarke, Lindsay. **Parzival and the Stone from Heaven: A Grail Romance Retold for Our Time.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-710929-6, x+229pp, B-format paperback, cover by Alan Lee, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2001; this is a retelling of Wolfram von Aschenbach's verse romance *Parzival* [from "the brilliant first half of the Hohenstaufen period of medieval German culture," around the year 1200]; it seems to be skilfully and stylishly



BOOKS RECEIVED



FEBRUARY 2003

done, and is probably one to put on the shelf alongside Andre Norton's *Huon of the Horn* [1951] and the few other examples of medieval "popular fiction" made accessible to the modern reader; the author, or *rédacteur*, is Victor Lindsay Clarke [born 1939], whose earlier works include the novel *The Chymical Wedding* [1989].) *3rd March 2003.*

Clemens, James. **Wit'ch War: Book Three of The Banned and the Banned.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-190-X, 710pp, A-format paperback, £7.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2000; the sequel to *Wit'ch Fire* [1998] and *Wit'ch Storm* [1999]; it's copyrighted in the name of Jim Czajkowski.) *February 2003.*

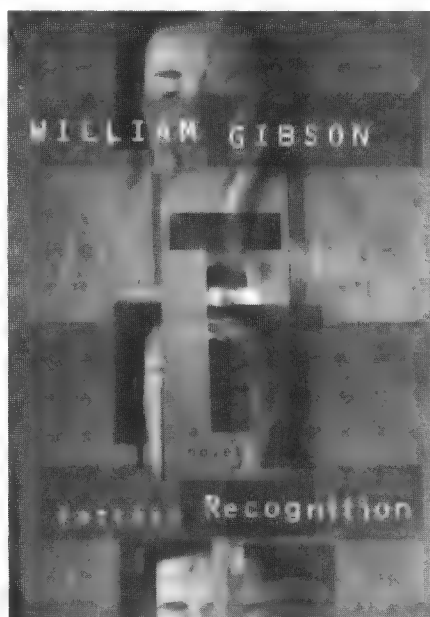
Cockayne, Steve. **The Iron Chain: Legends of the Land, Book Two.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-156-X, 356pp, C-format paperback, cover by Bob Warner, £10.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; a follow-up to this British author's debut novel, *Wanderers and Islanders* [2002], which received some praise.) *February 2003.*

Cook, Thomas H. **Taken.** Contender Books [48 Margaret St., London W1W 8SE], 1-84357-082-3, 355pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf TV-serial novelization, first published in the USA, 2002; this, penned by a well-known American crime novelist, is "based on the series created by Leslie Bohem"; more accurately, it's based on the script for a ten-part serial [or "miniseries"] produced by DreamWorks

Television for the Sci-Fi Channel; the subject matter, of course, is UFO encounters and alien abductions – hey, hasn't that been done before?) 6th February 2003.

Cousin de Grainville, Jean-Baptiste François Xavier. **The Last Man.** Translated by I. F. and M. Clarke. "Early Classics of Science Fiction." Wesleyan University Press [110 Mt Vernon St., Middletown, CT 06459, USA], ISBN 0-8195-6608-X, xli+157pp, trade paperback, cover by Gustave Doré, \$17.95. (Sf novel, first published in France as *Le Dernier Homme*, 1805; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen] priced at \$45; this is a new translation of an historically important work, originally translated into English as *The Last Man*; or, *Omegarus and Syderia: A Romance in Futurity* [1806] – which edition is said to have been influential on Mary Shelley, who also wrote a novel called *The Last Man* [1826]; this new volume contains a lengthy introduction and notes by I. F. Clarke; Jean-Baptiste François Xavier Cousin de Grainville [1746-1805] was one of a number of remarkable French precursors of the literary form we now know as science fiction; his book is, in effect, a prose epic poem [divided into "cantos"] which meditates on far-future history and the end of the human race – subjects which had not been tackled in fiction before Cousin de Grainville's time.) Late entry: 15th January publication, received in February 2003.

De Paolo, Charles. **Human Prehistory in Fiction.** McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-1417-0, xi+160pp, trade paperback, \$32. (Critical study of prehistoric and anthropological themes in novels and short stories; first edition; sterling-priced import copies should be available in the UK from Shelving Ltd, 4 Pleydell Gdns., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN; the author is a professor of English at the City University of New York, and parts of the book first appeared as essays in *SF Studies* and *Foundation*; the title of this work may be misleading to some readers, in that it doesn't deal much with actual prehistory: perhaps it would have been more accurately titled *Apes, Ape-Men and Protohumans in Fiction*, dealing as it does with books like H. G. Wells's *The Island of Dr Moreau* and Pierre Boulle's *The Planet of the Apes*; that quibble aside, it looks to be an academically solid study; other works which it covers in some depth include Jules Verne's *The Village in the Treetops*, Edgar Rice Burroughs's *The Land That Time Forgot*, William Golding's *The Inheritors*, Arthur C.



Clarke's 2001: *A Space Odyssey*, and Jean Auel's *The Clan of the Cave Bear*.) April 2003.

Dickson, Gordon R. **Dorsai Spirit.** Introduction by David Drake. Tor/Orb, ISBN 0-312-87761-7, 430pp, trade paperback, cover by Royo, \$15.95. (Sf omnibus, first published in the USA, 2002; it contains the novel *Dorsai!* [first published as *The Genetic General*, 1960; restored text 1976] and the collection of linked stories *The Spirit of Dorsai* [1979], two key works in the late Mr Dickson's unfinished "Childe Cycle" of future evolutionary adventures – "a pair of military SF classics every fan will want to own.") 10th March 2003.

Elliott, Kate. **The Gathering Storm: Volume Five of Crown of Stars.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-092-X, xvii+903pp, C-format paperback, cover by Melvin Grant, £12.99.



(Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2003; "Kate Elliott" [or Katrina Elliott, as it says in the copyright statement] is a pseudonym of Alis A. Rasmussen; the publishers tell us this series of hers has "already sold over 100,000 copies" – hmm, you can see why so many people get into this Big Commercial Fantasy lark.) February 2003.

Fisher, Jude. **Sorcery Rising: Book One of Fool's Gold.** Earthlight, 0-7432-4040-4, 502pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Young, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2002; opening volume of an Icelandic-flavoured high fantasy trilogy; "Jude Fisher" is a pseudonym of HarperCollins/Voyager editor Jane Johnson, who has previously written several cat fantasies in collaboration with M. John Harrison under the joint pseudonym "Gabriel King"; this is her first solo novel.) 3rd March 2003.

Flynn, Michael. **The Wreck of the River of Stars.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30099-0, 480pp, hardcover, \$27.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; about the fate of a space-liner called the *River of Stars* [natch], it's billed as "Robert A. Heinlein meets Patrick O'Brian in deep space.") April 2003.

Gibson, William. **Pattern Recognition.** Viking, ISBN 0-670-87559-7, 331pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1999; proof copy received; written in "prose simultaneously as hard and laconic as Elmore Leonard's and as glacially poetic as J. G. Ballard's" [in the words of a *New Statesman* reviewer], this is Gibson's first new novel since *All Tomorrow's Parties* [1999]; it's set mainly in London, in the present day; the plot, which involves a young woman's search for a "shadowy cinematic auteur," sounds oddly similar to that of Theodore Roszak's memorable horror novel *Flicker* [1991] – though no doubt they're very different books.) 24th April 2003.

Greenland, Colin. **Finding Helen.** Black Swan, ISBN 0-552-77080-9, 368pp, B-format paperback, £6.99. (Literary fantasy [?] novel, first edition; Greenland's first new novel in some years [and a change of publisher for him], this is being promoted as a mainstream love story, although it may have some slight fantasy content; it comes with advance commendations from people like Robert Irwin and Charles Palliser.) 6th March 2003.

Hamilton, Laurell K. **A Caress of Twilight.** Bantam, ISBN 0-553-81384-6, 441pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Fantasy/crime novel, first published in the USA, 2002; follow-up to *A Kiss of Shadows* [2001], feature-

ing the continuing adventures of "Merry Gentry... a private investigator... [who] is also a Faerie Princess in hiding"; the magazine *SFX* is quoted, commending the previous novel's "relentless high-paced trashiness.") 6th March 2003.

Hobb, Robin. **The Golden Fool: The Tawny Man, II.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-716039-9, 632pp, C-format paperback, cover by John Howe, £11.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2002; the first sentence of the blurb reads thus: "Fitz and the Fool have succeeded in rescuing Prince Dutiful from the clutches of the Piebald rebels, and have returned with him to Buckkeep Castle..."; frankly, some of us prefer our light reading to go like this: "Among the dust of forgotten suns, in a darkness that no longer knew the light and life of stars, Owen Deathstalker and Hazel d'Ark came again to the Wolfing World..." [Simon R. Green]; but Hobb [aka Megan Lindholm] undoubtedly has a large and enthusiastic following.) 3rd March 2003.

Holdstock, Robert. **Celtika: Book One of the Merlin Codex.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30692-1, 350pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2001; proof copy received; in which, "centuries before he meets Arthur, Merlin wanders the Earth, eternally young, a traveller on the path of magic and learning; during his journeys he encounters Jason, and joins his search for the Golden Fleece"; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 164, it's appearing in America two years late.) April 2003.

Holt, Tom. **Little People.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-185-3, 374pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Cemmick, £6.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2002; it concerns elves.) 6th March 2003.

Holt, Tom. **The Portable Door.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-158-6, 404pp, hardcover, cover by Paul Cemmick, £16.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; this is Holt's second new hardcover novel within the space of two months [see *A Song for Nero*, listed here a couple of issues ago].) 6th March 2003.

Hyne, C. J. Cutcliffe. **The Lost Continent: The Story of Atlantis.** Introduction by Harry Turtledove. Afterword by Gary Hoppenstand. "Bison Frontiers of Imagination." Bison Books [University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, NE 68588-0255, USA], ISBN 0-8032-7332-0, xiv+257pp, trade paperback, cover by Thomas Floyd, £11.50. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1900; this is the American edition of 2002 with a UK price and publication date April 2003

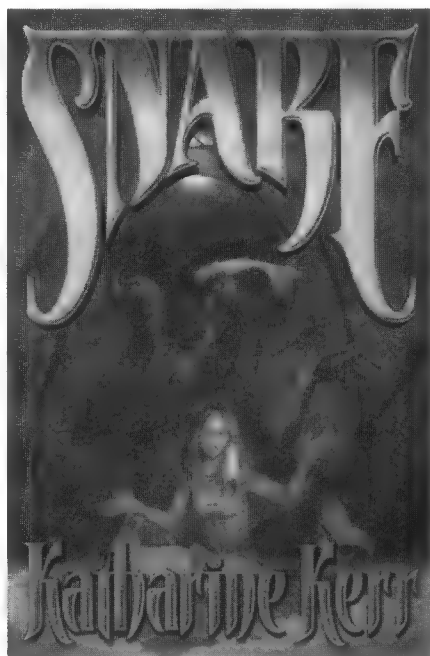
'Brilliantly funny' Mail on Sunday

TOM HOLT

THE PORTABLE DOOR



added, distributed in the UK by Combined Academic Publishers Ltd, 15a Lewin's Yard, East St., Chesham, Bucks. HP5 1HQ; Charles John Cutcliffe Hyne [1865-1944] was a prolific writer for the British popular magazines [the "pre-pulps"] around the turn of the last century; although he was best known in his lifetime for his long series of "Captain Kettle" seafaring yarns [almost as popular in *Pearson's Magazine* as Doyle's Sherlock Holmes was in *The Strand*], the only work of his which has lived on – in terms of latterday reprints – is this adventurous romance of ancient Atlantis; it was first serialized in *Pearson's*, July-December 1899; as Hoppenstand hints in his long and



informative afterword, it was Hyne's attempt "to do a Rider Haggard" [just as Doyle's attempt to do something similarly Haggardian, a decade or so later, resulted in *The Lost World* (1912)]. Late entry: 30th January publication, received in February 2003.

Jordan, Robert. **Crossroads of Twilight.** "Book Ten of The Wheel of Time." Tor, ISBN 0-312-86459-0, 700pp, hardcover, cover by Darrell K. Sweet, \$29.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition [?]; Jordan's by-now customary biannual opus, no doubt this will be another huge bestseller, crushing all before it on the mainstream lists both sides of the Atlantic; "Robert Jordan" is a pseudonym for James Rigney, Jr; the British edition [Orbit] also appeared in January, so it's unclear which has priority.) Late entry: January publication, received in February 2003.

Kerr, Katharine. **Snare: A Novel of the Far Future.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-89045-1, 591pp, hardcover, \$27.95. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 2003; proof copy received; it's set circa the year 4200 AD, at a time when the English, French and Arabic languages have mutated into new forms; the author makes the following prefatory apology, perhaps a sign of our present times: "In the same way, the outer forms of the religions described have mutated to a greater or lesser degree. I sincerely hope that no believers will find this offensive...") April 2003.

Kessler, Angela, ed. **The Best of Dreams of Decadence.** "From the premier magazine of vampire literature." Roc, ISBN 0-451-45918-0, xiv+337pp, A-format paperback, \$6.99. (Horror anthology, first edition; it contains stories and poems from the small-press magazine *Dreams of Decadence*, which debuted in October 1995 and is reputed to have been quite a niche-market success for its publisher, Warren Lapine, and its editor, Angela Kessler; the contributors, all writing on vampiric themes, include Laura Anne Gilman, Sarah A. Hoyt, Sharon Lee, Tanith Lee, Lyda Morehouse, Lawrence Schimel, Josepha Sherman, Brian Stableford and Lawrence Watt-Evans, among many others more obscure.) March 2003.

King, Stephen. **Everything's Eventual: 14 Dark Tales.** New English Library, ISBN 0-340-77074-0, xx+538pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Horror collection, first published in the USA, 2002; 14 short stories, four of which first appeared in *The New Yorker*, plus a new introduction by the writer billed as "one of the great storytellers of our time.") 10th March 2003.

Lawhead, Stephen. **Patrick: Son of Ireland.** "The slave who became a soldier..." HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-714884-4, 454pp, hardcover, cover by David Scutt, £17.99. (Historical novel, first edition; it may or may not have some fantasy content, but essentially this is a fictional "autobiography," written from a committed Christian perspective, of the 5th-century evangelist of Ireland, Saint Patrick.) 17th March 2003.

Lori, E. E. **Dream Maker.** Vanguard Press [Sheraton House, Castle Park, Cambridge], ISBN 1-843860-13-9, 287pp, B-format paperback, £8.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; this has been sent to us by the author, Ebule Lori, who lives in Hainault, Essex; she describes herself as "a young female, black author, aged 21"; an otherworldly fantasy with juvenile protagonists, it looks to be aimed at kids, although it's not specifically labelled as young-adult fiction.) No date shown: received in February 2003.

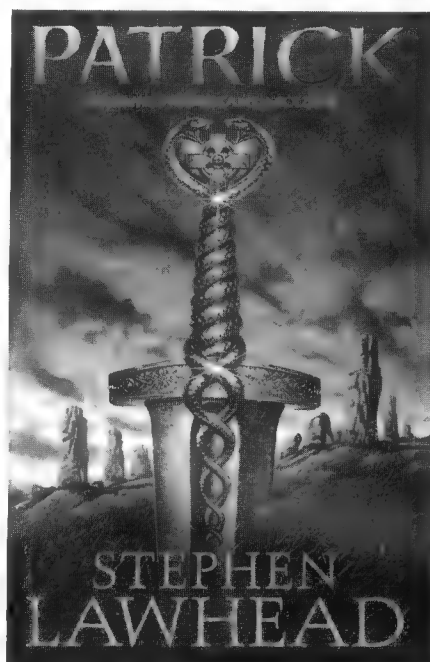
McGarry, Terry. **The Binder's Road.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30428-7, 508pp, hardcover, cover by Gary Ruddell, \$27.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; sequel to *Illumination* [2001].) 26th March 2003.

Modesitt, L. E., Jr. **Shadowsinger: Book Five of the Spellsong Cycle.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-206-X, ix+612pp, A-format paperback, cover by Melvyn Grant, £7.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2002; fifth and last in its series.) February 2003.

Orman, Kate. **Blue Box.** "Doctor Who." BBC, 0-563-53859-7, 269pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Sixth Doctor and Peri, this is Australian writer Orman's 11th "Who" novel.) 3rd March 2003.

Parker, K. J. **Pattern: The Scavenger Trilogy, Book Two.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-182-9, 568pp, A-format paperback, cover by David Wyatt, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2002.) 6th March 2003.

Pastourmatzi, Domna, ed. **Biotechnological and Medical Themes in Science Fiction.** University Studio Press [Thessaloniki, Greece], ISBN 960-12-1133-0, 512pp, trade paperback, no price shown. (Collection of critical essays on biological themes in sf; first edition; this is a hefty, illustrated, English-language book published in Greece ["financed by the Hellenic Ministry of Culture"]; the interesting line-up of contributors includes Russell Blackford, Candace Jane Dorsey, Andrew Enstice, Gerald David Nordley, Joan L. Slonczewski,



Susan M. Squier, Darko Suvin and Janeen Webb, as well as a number of Greek scholars whose names will be less familiar to English-language readers; topics covered include "The Brain Plague: Brains and Biology in SF," "Transplant Medicine and Transformative Narrative," "Bio-Slavery, or the Cannibalistic Quest for Longevity," "Fading Bodies: The Invisible in SF" and "A Terrible Beauty: David Zindell and the Trans-Human Condition"; in addition to the last-named, Zindell, authors whose work is particularly considered include Greg Bear, Octavia Butler, Pat Cadigan, Philip K. Dick, Paul Di Filippo, Greg Egan and Rebecca Ore.) Late entry: 2002 publication, received in February 2003.



Sánchez, Javier García. **The Others.** Translated by Margaret Jull Costa. Dedalus, ISBN 1-903517-12-5, 182pp, B-format paperback, cover by Willi Gray, £7.99. (Sf [?] novel, first published in Spain, 1998; the author was born in Barcelona in 1955, and has won several awards for his fiction, although this looks to be his first novel to appear in English translation; about strange disappearances, it was filmed in Spain as *Nos Miran* ["They're Watching Us"], directed by Norberto Lopez.) 5th March 2003.

Silver, Steven H., and Martin H. Greenberg, eds. **Magical Beginnings.** "The stories that launched the careers..." DAW, ISBN 0-7564-0121-6, 343pp, A-format paperback, cover by James Gurney, \$6.99. (Fantasy anthology, first edition; follow-up to the previous month's *Wondrous Beginnings* [sf tales], it contains 16 reprint stories, all of which are ostensibly their authors' first published works in the genre; contributors, arranged in chronological order of first appearance, include Andre Norton, Peter S. Beagle, Ursula K. Le Guin, Susan Schwartz, Charles de Lint, Megan Lindholm, Ellen Kushner, Esther Friesner, Mickey Zucker Reichert, Emma Bull, Mercedes Lackey, Tanya Huff, Kristine Kathryn Rusch and others; the stories contain newly-written introductions by the authors, which give some added value to the book – but this is a format which works less well for fantasy than it does for sf, given that most of the above reputations were first made by novels, not short stories.) January 2003.

Silverberg, Robert, ed. **The Science Fiction Hall of Fame, Volume One, 1929-1964.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30536-4, xiv+560pp, hardcover, cover by Kenn Brown, \$27.95. (Sf anthology, first published in the USA, 1970; it bears the sub-sub-title, "The Greatest Science Fiction Stories of All Time, Chosen by the Members of the Science Fiction Writers of America"; in other words, the contents were selected by a ballot of the SFWA membership as, in effect, retrospective Nebula Award-winners; although there's a lot of famous stuff here – from Stanley G. Weinbaum's jolly 1930s yarn "A Martian Odyssey" to Roger Zelazny's prose-poetic 1960s tale "A Rose for Ecclesiastes" [both, as it happens, set on a now-impossible Mars] – it's sad to say that much of it is looking distinctly timeworn; perhaps the stories which have lasted best are the more "fabular" [and therefore timeless] pieces such as Cordwainer Smith's "Scanners Live in Vain," Jerome Bixby's "It's a

Good Life" and Damon Knight's "The Country of the Kind.") 27th February 2003.

Simpson, M. J. **Hitchhiker: A Biography of Douglas Adams.** Foreword by John Lloyd. Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-82488-3, xviii+393pp, hardcover, £18.99. (Biography of the late humorous sf writer, first edition; it contains eight pages of black-and-white photographs; M. J. [Mike] Simpson, an erstwhile editor of SFX magazine, has already written a smaller book on Adams's work, *The Pocket Essential Hitchhiker's Guide* [2001]; here he has written a full-scale, formal biography, and seems to have made a very good stab at it; recommended.) 3rd March 2003.

Spinrad, Norman. **The Druid King.** "One man against the might of Rome." Little, Brown, ISBN 0-316-86158-8, 439pp, C-format paperback, cover by Steve Stone, £10.99. (Historical novel, first edition [?], 2003; although it's by a well-known sf writer, this is a "straight" historical epic of the first century BC, with no apparent fantasy content; if the book had been titled in the same fashion as Stephen Lawhead's latest [see above], then it would be called *Vercingetorix: Son of Gaul*.) February 2003.

Thompson, Mark. **Ark.** Matador [12 Manor Walk, Coventry Rd., Market Harborough, Leics. LE16 9BP], 1-899293-28-0, 210pp, A-format paperback, £7.99. (Sf novel, first edition; a debut novel by an author who lives in Surrey ["He is married and has five children"]; according to the accompanying publicity letter: "The idyllic Kent countryside is the tranquil backdrop to this explosive tale of evolutionary biology that will cause us to re-evaluate our traditional beliefs.") 6th February 2003.

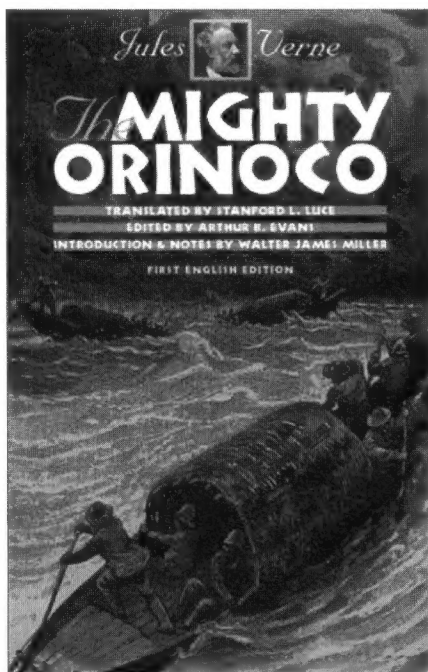
Turtledove, Harry. **Jaws of Darkness.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30417-1, 576pp, hardcover, \$27.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; follow-up to *Into the Darkness* [1999], *Darkness Descending* [2000], *Through the Darkness* [2001] and *Rulers of the Darkness* [2002] in the ongoing series about a world war "in a world where magic works.") April 2003.

Van Lustbader, Eric. **The Veil of a Thousand Tears: Volume Two of The Pearl Saga.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648608-8, 630pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Howe, £7.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2002; follow-up to *The Ring of Five Dragons* [2001]; the author has restored the original "Van" to his name, after several years of publishing simply as Eric Lustbader; a Big Commercial Fantasy by a veteran, it's set

partly on another planet, "where magic is the basis of the pastoral, egalitarian Kundalan civilization..." which comes under attack from "a brutally militaristic empire ruled by long-lived technomages.") 3rd March 2003.

Verne, Jules. **The Mighty Orinoco.** Translated by Stanford L. Luce. Edited by Arthur B. Evans. Introduction and notes by Walter James Miller. "Early Classics of Science Fiction." Wesleyan University Press [110 Mt Vernon St., Middletown, CT 06459, USA], ISBN 0-8195-6511-3, xvii+424pp, hardcover, cover by George Roux, \$29.95. (Adventure novel, first published in France as *Le Superbe Orénoque*, 1898; it contains the original illustrations by George Roux, and there are also a good introduction and extensive notes by Verne scholar Walter James Miller; surprisingly, this is the first-ever English translation of this particular Verne novel, described as "the story of a young man's search for his father along the then-uncharted Orinoco River of Venezuela," with "all the ingredients of a classic Verne scientific-adventure tale: exploration and discovery, humour and drama, dastardly villains and intrepid heroes, and a host of near-fatal encounters with crocodiles, jungle fever, Indians and outlaws..."; despite its inclusion in this series, and the publishers' description of it as a "scientific-adventure tale," it's not really sf – more of a geographical romance; there's an interesting feminist twist, in that the "young man" of the above plot description turns out to be a young woman in disguise.) 26th February 2003.

Wallis, James. **Mark of Damnation.** "A Warhammer Novel." Games Workshop/Black Library, ISBN 1-84154-



279-2, 287pp, A-format paperback, cover by Clint Langley, £5.99. (Fantasy role-playing game spinoff novel, first edition; apparently, the author has written widely, "for publications from the *Sunday Times* to the *Fortean Times*," but this may be his debut novel.) February 2003.

Wells, H. G. **Man Who Could Work Miracles: A Critical Text of the 1936 New York First Edition, with an Introduction and Appendices.** Edited by Leon Stover. "The Annotated H. G. Wells, 8." McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-1237-2, ix+142pp, hardcover, \$49.50. (Fantasy film scenario, first published in the USA, 1936; first edition in this expanded, annotated form; the movie in question was made by Alexander Korda's London Films and released in 1937 [and is well worth viewing; when I re-watched it on videotape, a couple of years ago, parallels with J. G. Ballard's *The Unlimited Dream Company* struck me for the first time – DP]; the other Stover-edited volumes of Wells's novels and novellas in this series to date are *The Time Machine* [1996], *The Island of Dr Moreau* [1996], *The Invisible Man* [1998], *The First Men in the Moon* [1998], *When the Sleeper Wakes* [2000], *The War of the Worlds* [2001] and *The Sea Lady* [2001]; as with the earlier books, Stover has done an apparently thorough job, adding hefty slabs of notes and multiple appendices plus a bibliography; among the appended material is the original short story, "The Man Who Could Work Miracles" [1898], upon which Wells's 1930s film scenario was based; it's useful to have all this material together in one handy volume; however, the usual caveats have to be made: Leon Stover has a bee in his bonnet – he believes that Wells was a kind of proto-fascist "Statist," uninterested in democratic values or the welfare of the common man, and this is a view of Wells that is contested by many other Wells scholars.) April 2003.

Wells, H. G. **The War in the Air.** Introduction by Dave Duncan. "Bison Frontiers of Imagination." Bison Books [University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, NE 68588-0255, USA], ISBN 0-8032-9831-5, xi+258pp, trade paperback, cover by R. W. Boeche, £12.50. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1908; this is the American edition of 2002 with a UK price and publication date added, distributed in the UK by Combined Academic Publishers Ltd, 15a Lewin's Yard, East St., Chesham, Bucks. HP5 1HQ; ah, *The War in the Air!* – in our humble opinion, this tale of airships and near-future total warfare, Edwardian style, is one of the very best of



Wells's works; it combines the virtues of his two main modes as a novelist – that of the scientific romance [*The War of the Worlds*, etc] and that of the lower-class social comedy [*Kipps*, etc]; Kingsley Amis particularly commended it in *New Maps of Hell* [1960], and he was right; it was first serialized in *The Pall Mall Magazine*, January–December 1908, although we're not told that here; alas, there is no scholarly afterword in this edition, as there is in most Bison Books reprints of old sf; also, they have dropped the book's subtitle [in full, it should read *The War in the Air, and Particularly How Mr Bert Smallways Fared While It Lasted*]; sadly, too, the brief but memorable preface to the first British paperback edition [Penguin Books, 1941], issued during the Blitz, is missing: it concluded with these words: "Is there anything to add...? Nothing except my epitaph. That, when the time comes, will manifestly have to be: 'I told you so. You damned fools.'" *Late entry: 30th January publication, received in February 2003.*

Whitehead, Mark. **The Pocket Essential Roger Corman.** "Pocket Essentials Film." Pocket Essentials [18 Coleswood Rd., Harpenden, Herts. AL5 1EQ], ISBN 1-904048-10-2, 96pp, A-format paperback, £3.99. (Unillustrated guide to the movies, mainly horrific and science-fictional, of American low-budget producer-director Roger Corman [born 1926]; first edition; it's another useful little volume in this ever-expanding series on the popular arts – they're still good value for money.) *February 2003.*

Williams, Lynda, and Alison Sinclair. **Throne Price.** Edge [PO Box 1714, Calgary, Alberta T2P 2L7, Canada], ISBN 1-894063-06-6, 333pp, trade paperback, \$13.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; this is probably a debut for Canadian writer Lynda Williams [born 1958], but it's not for British-born, Canadian-resident Alison Sinclair [born 1959], who has published several sf novels in the UK; it's a large, "epic" effort, set "in the far reaches of space where two vastly different cultures are on the brink of war.") *15th March 2003.*

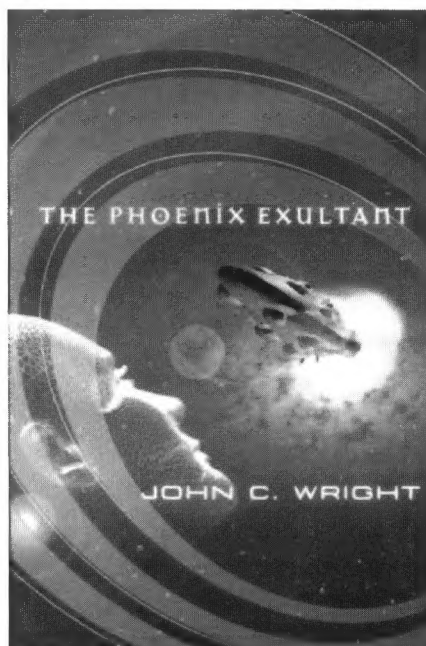
Wilson, John. **Guardians of Alexander: Goldbane, 1.** Big Engine [PO Box 185, Abingdon, Oxon. OX14 1GR], ISBN 1-903468-09-4, 266pp, trade paperback, cover by Deirdre Counihan, £9.99. (Historical sf/fantasy novel, first edition; concerning Alexander the Great and events following his death in 323 BC, this is the first in a trilogy about a secret organization, possibly run by an alien intelligence, which influences the course of human history; the

author is British and evidently not young: he has published several previous books, described as "psychological thrillers, humour and black comedy"; for ordering information, see the publisher's website: www.bigengine.co.uk.) States "Copyright 2002" inside, but sent to us in February 2003.

Wright, John C. **The Phoenix Exultant: A Romance of the Far Future. Book Two of The Golden Age.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30432-5, 304pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; it's described as "a second epic novel of a quest in a far-future world of super science from an important new talent... a grand space opera in the tradition of Jack Vance and Roger Zelazny [with a touch of Cordwainer Smith].") *May 2003.*

Zettel, Sarah. **A Sorcerer's Treason: Book One of the Isavaltia Trilogy.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-711400-1, 595pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Stone, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2002; a Big Commercial Fantasy by an American author [born 1966] who had previously written four sf novels, including *Reclamation* [1996], winner of the Locus Best First Novel Award, and *Fool's War* [1997], which was shortlisted for the Philip K. Dick Award as best paperback original of its year.) *3rd March 2003.*

Zettel, Sarah. **The Usurper's Crown.** "A Novel of Isavaltia." Tor, ISBN 0-312-87442-1, 525pp, hardcover, cover by Romas, \$27.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, with the subtitle "Book Two of the Isavaltia Trilogy," 2002; proof copy received.) *April 2003.*



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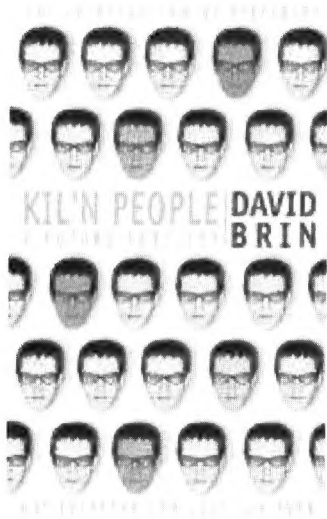
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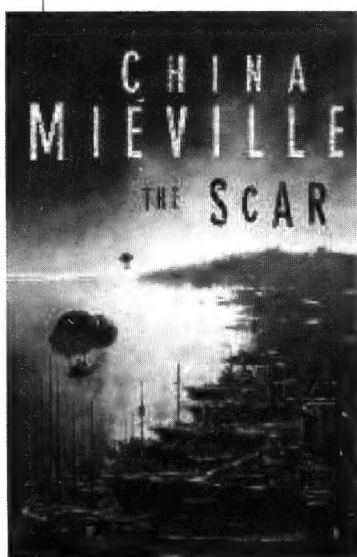


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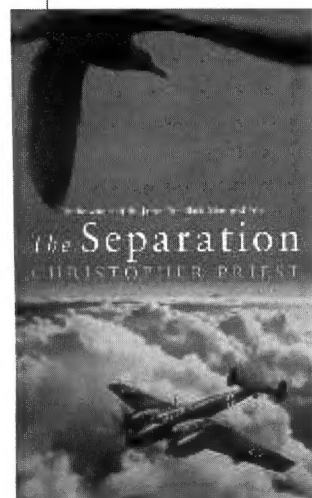
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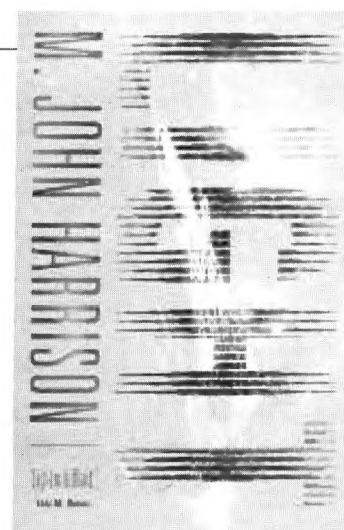
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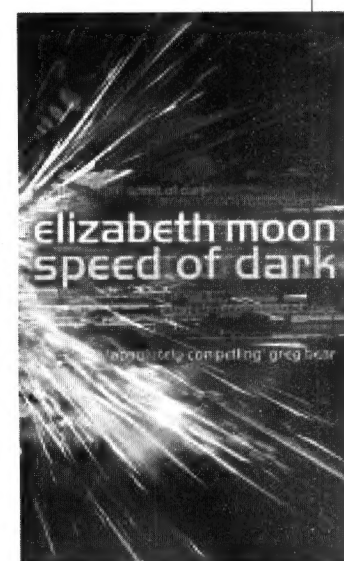
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